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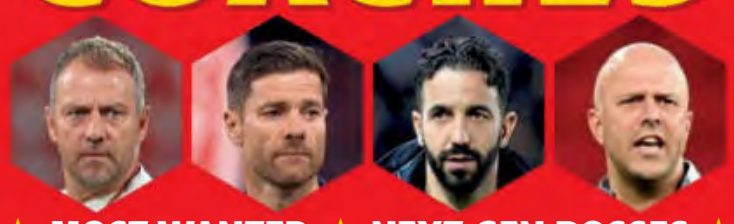

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How the United States beat Mexico to the Nations League crown yet again

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LAUTARO MARTINEZ

Internazionale's captain and talisman firing his club to the Scudetto

SPOTLIGHT

COLE PALMER

The Chelsea starlet ready to make waves at this summer's Euros

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Contents

May 2024

FEATURES

28 In-demand coaches
Special feature

36 Lautaro Martinez
Player biography

43 International round-up
CONCACAF Nations League, Euro 2024 qualifiers & more

THE WORLD THIS MONTH
People in the news...on and off the pitch

4 In pictures
12 From the Editor
13 The month in numbers
14 **Keir Radnedge** Casement Park
16 **Jonathan Wilson** Premier League title race
17 Obituaries
18 Ins & Outs
19 ESM XI

SPECIAL REPORT
20 Oceania Champions League

SPECIAL FEATURE
24 Bundesliga's fallen giants

SPOTLIGHT
50 Cole Palmer

TURN BACK THE CLOCK
54 Manchester United v Arsenal, 1999

FACE TO FACE
58 Marco Rossi
64 Hugo Lloris
68 Srecko Katanec

WOMEN'S FOOTBALL
72 CONCACAF W Gold Cup review

MY BIGGEST GAME
99 Edmilson

50

64

68

99

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Exclusive subscription offer
See page 10

World Service
Exclusive reports from our worldwide network of correspondents

82
78 Copa Libertadores preview
80 Copa Sudamericana preview
82 Asian Champions League update
84 Brazil Campeonato Brasileiro Serie A preview
86 Canada Canadian Premier League preview
88 Malaysia Johor Darul Ta'zim's dominance
90 Tajikistan Making huge strides in Asia

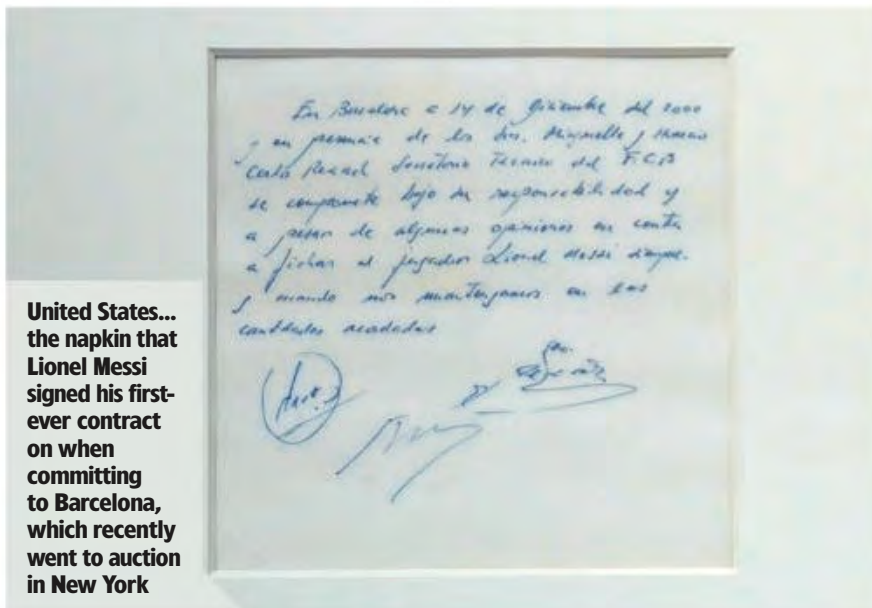
PLUS 91 Global diary 92 Serie A 2023-24 squads 94 Results, tables, fixtures

In Pictures

The global game caught on camera

United States...Chicago Fire goalkeeper Chris Brady agonisingly watches the ball cross the line after failing to save a penalty against CF Montreal in Major League Soccer

Argentina...Rodrigo Aliendro celebrates after scoring River Plate's winner in the dying moments of the Supercopa Argentina against Estudiantes



United States... the napkin that Lionel Messi signed his first-ever contract on when committing to Barcelona, which recently went to auction in New York

Brazil...Fluminense forward John Kennedy performs an acrobatic bicycle kick during the Recopa Sudamericana. The Brazilians beat LDU of Ecuador 2-1 over two legs to lift the trophy

Spain...Atletico Madrid's team bus arrives at the Metropolitano Stadium ahead of their Champions League last 16 second leg against Internazionale

Germany...third-tier Saarbrucken salute their fans after defeating Borussia Monchengladbach with a stoppage-time goal to reach the semi-finals of the German Cup

England...Manchester United forward Amad Diallo scores a last-gasp extra-time winner versus Liverpool in a thrilling FA Cup encounter *(see page 54 for another all-time classic FA Cup tie)*

Spain...Alvaro Djalo celebrates scoring against Uruguay for the Basque Country, their first game in over three years. The Braga forward will join Athletic Club this summer

Scotland...Andy Robertson reacts to picking up an injury during Scotland's friendly against Northern Ireland

Georgia...fans of Georgia storm the pitch after reaching their first-ever major international tournament finals by beating Greece on penalties in the Euro 2024 play-offs *(more on page 44)*

Republic of Ireland... John O'Shea urges his team on during his first match as interim coach of Republic of Ireland

United States...Mexico's Orbelin Pineda celebrates after scoring against Panama in the semi-finals of the CONCACAF Nations League *(more on page 46)*

England...Brazil teenager Endrick celebrates after becoming the youngest-ever male goalscorer at Wembley – aged just 17 years and 246 days – in the 1-0 win over England

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FROM THE EDITOR

The summer of 2016 saw perhaps the highest turnover of high-profile managers that European football has ever seen.

The Premier League saw the biggest changes: Jose Mourinho returned to England to replace Louis van Gaal at Manchester United and, in doing so, reignited his rivalry with Pep Guardiola who began his reign at Manchester City. Chelsea added their own big name in the dugout, Antonio Conte arriving after quitting the Italy national team, and it was also a time of change for Liverpool ahead of Jurgen Klopp's first full campaign in charge.

It was a similar story at Real Madrid, where Zinedine Zidane was still getting used to life as his old club's head coach having taken over just a few months earlier. His former mentor, Carlo Ancelotti, stepped into Guardiola's shoes at Bayern Munich, while Europa League winner Unai Emery left Sevilla for Paris Saint-Germain. Adding to the churn, Roberto Mancini exited Internazionale on the eve of the new Serie A season, replaced by Frank de Boer, while Vincenzo Montella also arrived at the San Siro as Milan's new coach.

Football is ready for a new coaching heavyweight to emerge and, this month, we've taken a closer look at who that might be

Maybe there was something in the European air that summer, an atmosphere of change that forced clubs' hands, causing a domino effect involving several of the continent's biggest clubs – or maybe it was simply a coincidence.

Whatever it was, something similar could be on the horizon in 2024. Liverpool, Bayern Munich and Barcelona will all have a new manager for the start of the season, while several other clubs will have to decide whether they stick or twist.

This May marks 21 years since Carlo Ancelotti won the first of his four Champions League trophies; in June, it will be 20 years since Jose Mourinho told a press conference "I think I'm a special one"; and July will mark the 11th anniversary of the first meeting between Pep Guardiola and Jurgen Klopp. In other words, football is ready for a new coaching heavyweight to emerge and, this month, we've taken a closer look at who that might be.

Elsewhere, in our final issue before our ultimate guide to Euro 2024, we've taken a deep dive into the biggest stories from March's international stories, secured an exclusive interview with Hungary coach Marco Rossi and profiled a potential young star of the finals, Cole Palmer, plus plenty more.

Jamie Evans, Managing Editor

EUROPE & THE AMERICAS

Ukraine's emotional return to Euros

Ukraine successfully qualified for a major tournament for the first time since the country was invaded by Russia in February 2022 after overcoming Iceland in their Euro 2024 play-off.

Poland will be heading to Germany as well after they beat Wales on penalties in Cardiff, and Georgia also needed a penalty shootout to knock out Greece. For a full review of the gripping Euro 2024 play-offs, turn to page 44.

Qualifying for this summer's Copa America was also completed in March, with Canada and Costa Rica defeating Trinidad & Tobago and Honduras respectively (see page 47). We'll have a full preview of the finals – set to take place in the United States in July – in our June issue. Next month's edition will be the highly anticipated Euro 2024 Special, out on May 10.

Poland hero...Wojciech Szczesny embraces his team-mates

"I just want to play football but it's hard to move forward. I feel less and less like playing [in Spain]…I will stay because that way the racists can continue to see my face more and more"

An emotional Vinicius Junior on the racist abuse he has received while playing for Real Madrid

Match winner… Mykhailo Mudryk celebrates scoring Ukraine's winner

FIFA

Qatar locked in as Under-17 World Cup host

FIFA have announced a series of changes to the men's Under-17 World Cup tournament, with Qatar set to host all of the next five editions – starting from 2025. Previously a 24-team biennial competition (from 2007 to 2023) – and before that a 16-team format following its inception in 1985 – the finals will now take place every year and feature 48 countries. The women's edition will also operate with the same timetable, but will take place in Morocco with 24 teams.

EUROPE

Latest setback for ESL

The proposed European Super League was hit by another setback after the European Union's Intellectual Property Office ruled that the name infringes upon Denmark's Superliga, the top tier of Danish football. Proponents of the new competition had, it emerged, attempted to register their trademark in the EU, but will now have to come up with an alternative name if they are to proceed with plans.

The month in numbers

Eye-catching facts and stats from the world of football this month…

225
Colombian league goals scored by Once Caldas' 38-year-old forward Dayro Moreno, setting a new record in the competition.

Record breaker …Dayro Moreno

2
Welsh champions
The New Saints became only the second club from Wales to reach the final of the Scottish Challenge Cup, losing 2-1 to Airdrieonians and seeing their 26-game winning streak in all competitions come to an end in the process.

$113m
Value of San Diego Wave, the most expensive club in NWSL history, after being bought by LA billionaires Arthur Levine and Lauren Leichtman.

150,000
Kai Havertz's goal for Arsenal in their 6-0 win away to Sheffield United was the 150,000th in the history of the English top flight.

205
Arrests that were made after violence erupted before the Rhine derby between Bundesliga clubs Borussia Monchengladbach and Cologne.

8
Years separating Arsenal's penalty-shootout win over Porto and the 2016 Champions League final, the previous occasion spot-kicks were required to decide a tie in Europe's elite club competition.

4
Points docked from Nottingham Forest after they were found to have breached Premier League profit and sustainability rules by an independent commission. The club have lodged an appeal against the deduction.

12
Arrests that were made by Turkish police after Trabzonspor supporters stormed the pitch and fought with visiting Fenerbahce players following their team's 3-2 defeat.

60
Yards that Chicago Fire midfielder Kellyn Acosta scored from in the MLS clash with CF Montreal, thanks to a bizarre gust of wind.

4
Bundesliga hat-tricks that Harry Kane scored for Bayern Munich this season after notching another against Mainz. No player has ever hit as many trebles in a debut Bundesliga campaign.

62
Cameroonian footballers suspended by the country's football federation for alleged identity fraud, with the individuals involved mostly accused of double identity and age cheating.

9
Foreign players that Brazilian clubs will be allowed to field in the 2024 national championship after the quota was increased for the new campaign (more on page 84).

6
Seconds it took for Austria forward Christoph Baumgartner to score against Slovakia – the quickest goal in international football history. On the same night, Florian Wirtz netted after just seven seconds against France to become Germany's fastest-ever international scorer.

22
People entered into the Premier League Hall of Fame after former Chelsea and Arsenal left-back Ashley Cole was inducted in March.

28
Consecutive matches won by Saudi Arabian side Al Hilal to surpass the world record previously held by Welsh club The New Saints in 2016-17.

World-record holders…Al Hilal

Keir RADNEDGE

THE INSIDER

The problem with Casement Park

The UK and Ireland's bid to host the European Championship in 2028 has one glaring issue

Casement Park... a photo of the derelict stand, taken in October

"Casement Park?"

There was high degree of puzzlement when the British and Irish associations revealed their Belfast venue for the European Championship finals in 2028. Windsor Park, fine: century-old home to Linfield and Northern Ireland's national team. But Casement Park? That was a new one.

Social historians recognised the name more than football fans did. Sir Roger Casement was a diplomat turned Irish nationalist who was among 16 rebels executed after the Easter Rising in Dublin in 1916, hence his being memorialised in the naming of a Gaelic Games stadium in Andersonstown, west Belfast, in the early 1950s.

The biggest puzzle about Casement Park, though, is whether it really will welcome the Euros in 2028. Or is it doomed to remain a trick question: "Name the Euro venue that did not stage a match?"

Old antagonisms lurk not far below the surface and the financial implications, whatever the potential social legacy, are significant. History has its own role to play, bearing in mind Ireland's sporting division between the Gaelic Games and the rest.

The divide was exposed to wider view in 2007, when the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) suspended rules that enshrined its historic opposition to "English pastimes". The occasion was hiring out its 82,000-capacity Croke Park HQ as temporary home for the Republic of Ireland's association football team.

> Is it doomed to remain a trick question: "Name the Euro venue that did not stage a match?"

Reasoning was practical. The FA of Ireland (FAI) needed a temporary home while Lansdowne Road was redeveloped into what is now the Aviva Stadium and paid handsomely for the hire. Ireland's rugby team also had to play Six Nations matches at Croke Park (incidentally, Croke Park was also considered as a Euro 2028 venue, before the Aviva Stadium was ultimately preferred as Dublin's venue).

The politicking, by and large, has not impinged quite as directly on the proposed rebirth of Casement Park. Again, the reason is simple: the venue not only lacks the symbolism of Croke Park, but has been derelict for a decade. The gates were locked after its last match in 2013. Quite why the stadium was allowed to fall into such a state of disrepair is unclear. Nonetheless, discussion on its state and fate has been shaded by deeper contentions.

This past decade has seen a sadly predictable sequence of redevelopment proposals and matching objections. A dismissal by the High Court of a final objection in 2022 appeared to be a long-awaited green light for a stadium that was the answer to a UEFA prayer. The initial plan envisaged a capacity of 34,500 – 4,500 above the UEFA minimum and 16,000 more than

Windsor Park – but that has now been trimmed to the precise 30,000 with plans to increase the capacity after the Euros.

Thus a path had been cleared for the inclusion of Casement Park as the Irish FA's (IFA) venue for Euro 2028 alongside the other nine confirmed by the formality of UEFA's hosting award last October (one each from Republic of Ireland, Scotland and Wales, plus six from England).

Until then, the Casement Park saga had played out deep in the shadows of overwhelmingly more significant matters including a double collapse of the power-sharing agreement and the Brexit protocol furore. In comparison, reviving a sports stadium was small change but now a realistic subject for action (or not).

The next decisive step forward was the return in February this year of devolved government with Michelle O'Neill of Sinn Fein becoming Northern Ireland's first nationalist First Minister. The Stormont assembly's reawakening promised direct interest and influence in Casement Park. This may prove crucial since estimated costs have shot up from the original (highly optimistic) £77.5m to £110m, then £220m and even a rumoured £308m.

"Casement Park is a flagship project for the Executive...and I am determined to see that that is the case," O'Neill insisted. "We are still working our way through the detail. I have read some of those figures and I think we need to dissect that a lot further.

"I am determined for us to get this project over the line and to secure the Euros here. The Euros is a huge opportunity for us not to be missed."

Fine in theory, but the funding practicality is another matter.

In 2011, Stormont pledged £62.5m to a general stadia upgrade project but that won't scratch the surface after more than a decade of disuse. More recently, the GAA has offered £15m and the Republic of Ireland government has allocated €50m (£42.8m) as a gesture of support for the Gaelic social fabric in the North.

Not everyone appreciated that. Criticism flared in the south over such an investment on the other side of the border, while Sir Jeffrey Donaldson from the Democratic Unionist Party in the North, although welcoming the cash announcement, sniffed: "It is not the responsibility of the Republic's government to provide financial support for the provision of public services and general Northern Ireland infrastructure. That is a matter for the UK."

The outlook remains cloudy. Certainly there was nothing positive in a letter from Chris Heaton-Harris, the Northern Ireland Secretary of State, to Stormont Communities Minister Gordon Lyons. His letter reportedly indicated that London "will not accept a position where it is expected to cover the scale of funding gap there appears to exist [for Casement Park]."

UEFA keeps a wary eye on the progress – the deadline to complete construction is set for mid-2027. If Casement Park falls through, Northern Ireland's presence in 2028 will be represented only by training venues.

One man who remains positively insistent this will not be the case is Patrick Nelson, CEO of the IFA. He is driven by the wider picture, saying: "We have been relentless in terms of bringing this tournament here – Belfast deserves it, Northern Ireland deserves it.

"It is not about five games of football or whatever it may be. It is about what we can do for the country through this. It's potentially one of the most seminal moments of the past 30 years. A huge opportunity."

That may well be true – but the clock is most certainly ticking.

EURO 2028 VENUES

ENGLAND
London, Wembley *(90,652)*
London, Tottenham Hotspur Stadium *(62,322)*
Manchester, Etihad Stadium *(61,000)*
Liverpool, Everton Stadium *(52,679 – new)*
Newcastle, St James' Park *(52,305)*
Birmingham, Villa Park *(52,190)*

NORTHERN IRELAND
Belfast, Casement Park *(30,000)*

REPUBLIC OF IRELAND
Dublin, Aviva Stadium *(51,711)*

SCOTLAND
Glasgow, Hampden Park *(52,032)*

WALES
Cardiff, Principality Stadium *(73,952)*

Unused...the ground hasn't seen any action since a Gaelic football match back in June 2013

BOOKS THIS MONTH

90+2
By John Boland (Pitch Publishing, £14.99)

90+2: Last Minute Moments that Changed Football History tells the story of football's most dramatic last-minute goals. From late twists that decided a league title, to the heartbreak of last-gasp goals that resulted in relegation, to incredible cup final drama, unbelievable second-leg recoveries and epic international tournament chaos – this is football at its most intense.

A CULTURE OF KITS
By John Blair (Pitch Publishing, £30)

Drawing on intel from experts and global collectors, this book provides the ultimate guide to classic football shirt collecting. What elevates a shirt's status? Who is buying? Are shirts an investment? *A Culture of Kits* lifts the lid on the booming business behind the growing culture and community of classic football shirts. Discover stunning photos of 150 eye-catching designs – dating back as far as the 1970s – and how to hunt for vintage classics to add those "Holy Grail" kits to your collection.

Jonathan WILSON
TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

A three-horse race

This season's Premier League title race is the tightest in 14 years

With ten games of the season to go, the top three in the Premier League were separated by a single point. The last time there was a three-way race remotely comparable was 2010 when, in mid-March, Chelsea, having played 29 games, topped the table on goal difference ahead of Arsenal, who had played 30, with Manchester United a point further back after 29 matches.

On that occasion, Arsenal fell away with a draw at Birmingham and defeat at Wigan and were effectively out of it with three games to go, but Chelsea and United kept the race alive until the final day – although with both facing fairly straightforward home games, the sense was that a 2-0 win away at Liverpool the week before had sealed it for Carlo Ancelotti's side. Perhaps the reason that it is not really remembered as a great climactic final day is that, while United beat Stoke 4-0, Chelsea wrapped up the title with an 8-0 win over Wigan.

The three contenders of 2023-24 all play high-tempo, high-pressing football. It's almost impossible in the modern game to succeed without playing like that. All three play variants of 4-3-3. All three have to some extent experimented with having a defender step into midfield. But it would be misleading to suggest there is anything more than a surface homogeneity.

The impact of Pep Guardiola over English football has been extraordinary. Drop down the leagues, or watch youth football, and you'll see teams instinctively playing out from the back (in which they have been aided by enormous leaps in pitch preparation). The success he has achieved with his modern interpretation of Cruyffian thought is remarkable. Yet what has been striking over the past couple of seasons is how he has amended his approach.

Three-horse race ...who will come out on top in the Premier League?

Last season, that was clearly extremely effective as City won the treble. But the concerns raised in the early months of that campaign about the knock-on effect of Erling Haaland have resurfaced. Haaland does not contribute to the game in the way that more obviously Guardiola-style forwards do. He does not drop deep or become an extra body, an extra angle, in midfield. What he does do is score lots of goals, which is obviously very useful. But there is a cost, which is that City have less control over games and that renders them more vulnerable to the counter-attack.

> The three contenders of 2023-24 all play high-tempo, high-pressing football. It's almost impossible in the modern game to succeed without playing like that

Fast and furious... Liverpool and City produced a thrilling encounter at Anfield

The vulnerability has worsened this season to the extent that only Crystal Palace in the Premier League have let in more goals to fast breakaways than City. There are two major reasons for that. Firstly, the injury to John Stones has meant that for much of the season he has not been there to step up from the back four and into the midfield, compensating for the absence of a forward dropping back. And secondly, Jeremy Doku, mesmerising as he can be on the ball, is yet to undergo the sort of reconditioning Jack Grealish has been through, and gives the ball away more frequently than is normal in a Guardiola side.

This reduced control over games meant Aston Villa were able to outplay City in December in a way we haven't seen before, and is why Liverpool had so many chances against City in the second half of their league game at Anfield. It's perhaps not unreasonable to also wonder if City are starting to get a little weary: six of the side that

started against Liverpool were in the squad when Guardiola first won the Premier League in 2017-18.

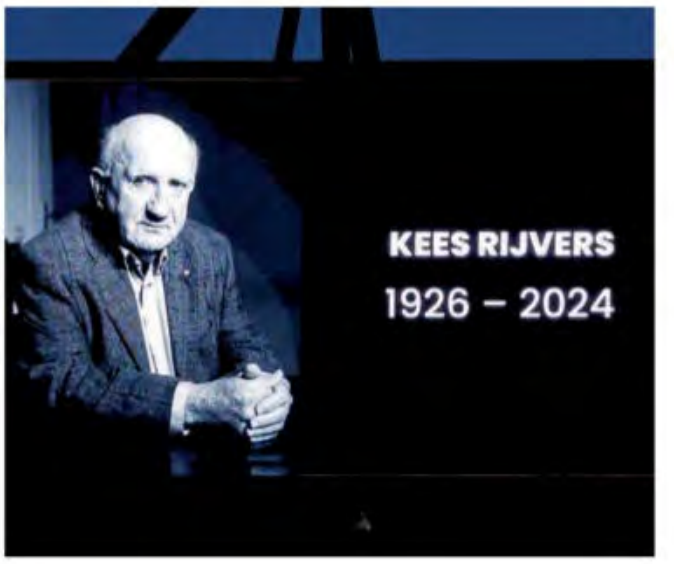
It feels as though Liverpool, whether by accident or design, have returned to something closer to Jurgen Klopp's origins. There is a thrillingly chaotic aspect to their attacking play and, particularly after a spate of injuries, a sense that they are playing constantly on the edge, borne at times only on the euphoric wave of Klopp's farewell.

Arsenal meanwhile, clearly show the influence of Guardiola – in fact, with Kai Havertz or Gabriel Jesus used at centre-forward, they are arguably more of a classic Guardiola side than City these days – but their great strength is set-plays. There has been a sense for a couple of seasons now that that was an underexploited area for Premier League clubs, but Arsenal have taken it to a new level; they've already scored more set-pieces goals than any club has ever achieved across a full Premier League season in the past 20 years. The question about them is less tactical than whether they can maintain self-belief if things turn against them.

Set-piece specialists ...Declan Rice's dead-ball deliveries have been key for Arsenal

What is most significant, though, is perhaps less how they are doing it than the fact there are three teams together at the top of the table. After years of duopoly, the Premier League needs a third force – and ideally a fourth and a fifth as well with the 20th not being quite so distant. How sustainable that is, though, is less a tactical question than a financial one.

OBITUARIES



Legendary coach...FC Twente pay tribute to their former manager

Kees RIJVERS
(1926-2024)
With professionalism still banned by the Dutch FA, Rijvers was suspended from playing for the Netherlands in 1950 when he left NAC Breda to join Saint-Etienne and become one of the first professional Dutch players. The midfielder remained frozen out of international football until joining Feyenoord in 1957, despite being nominated for the 1956 Ballon d'Or award.

Rijvers returned to France in 1960, adding a French Cup to the league title he lifted in 1957, but he is better known for his managerial career. His first senior role was with FC Twente – taking charge just a year after the club's formation – and in his six years in charge he sufficiently impressed to land the PSV job in 1972.

In his second season in Eindhoven he ended the club's 11-year wait for a trophy by lifting the Dutch Cup, won the league title a year later and the domestic double the year after, before signing off with the UEFA Cup and another league title in 1978.

In 1981, he took charge of the Dutch national team, but failed to achieve the same success. On his watch, the *Oranje* failed to qualify for the 1982 World Cup and Euro '84, which eventually saw him replaced by Rinus Michels, however he did hand debuts to a number of future superstars including Ronald Koeman, Ruud Gullit and Marco van Basten.

In 2004, he was presented with the inaugural lifetime achievement award by the Dutch coaches' union.

Roberto FLEITAS
(1932-2024)
A hugely influential Uruguayan coach, managing several of the country's biggest clubs as well as the national team itself. In 1987 Fleitas led Uruguay to Copa America glory, and a year later won the Copa Libertadores with Nacional, thereby becoming the first coach to win both South American continental prizes. Only three other men – Francisco Maturana, Oscar Tabarez and Tite – have done so since.

Mohammed BARAKAT
(1984-2024)
A Palestine international forward, who won three caps in 2013, was killed by an air strike in Gaza. The first Gazan player to score 100 goals, Barakat also represented Palestine in beach soccer.

Rolf BLATTLER
(1942-2024)
With 172 goals, the ex-Grasshoppers, Lugano, Basel and St Gallen forward is the fourth-highest scorer in the history of the Swiss top flight.

Peter KUNTER
(1941-2024)
Long-serving Eintracht Frankfurt goalkeeper who played 234 Bundesliga games in the 1960s and '70s despite standing at less than 5ft 7ins tall.

Minervino PIETRA
(1954-2024)
The Portugal right-back spent the bulk of his career at Benfica after joining the Lisbon giants from Belenenses in 1976, winning four league titles and five cups. After retiring, he went into coaching and worked as an assistant at a host of clubs before joining Benfica's staff in 2007. He remained with the club until 2022.

Leon SEMMELING
(1940-2024)
Only three players have made more appearances for Standard Liege than Semmeling, who won five league titles in 15 years at the club. The midfielder also won 35 caps for Belgium, playing at the 1970 World Cup and the 1972 European Championship.

Ron BAYNHAM
(1929-2024)
A long-serving goalkeeper for Luton Town, playing 434 games between 1951 and 1965, including the 1959 FA Cup final, which the Hatters lost to Nottingham Forest. Baynham also won three England caps, and before his death was the oldest surviving English international.

Baynham ...the Luton and England goalkeeper in 1955

"I went to speak to them. Really informal, enjoyable…it was good to see what their thoughts were and to explore whether I was ready to take that next step. It just went no further"

England U21 boss Lee Carsley reveals in the *Daily Mail* that he had talks with the Republic of Ireland about their managerial vacancy

IN

PEOPLE ON THE MOVE

35 Moves That Caught Our Eye This Month

OUT

EUROPE

RICHARD HUGHES & MICHAEL EDWARDS
Liverpool confirmed that Bournemouth's technical director will be their sporting director from this summer. The 44-year-old was hired by the Reds' former sporting director Edwards, who returned to Anfield as CEO of football.

IGOR TUDOR
The Croatian took charge of **Lazio** after Maurizio Sarri stepped down from the role.

FABIO LIVERANI
Salernitana fired their coach after he took just one point from his five games in charge.

ROBERTO D'AVERSA
The head coach was sacked by **Lecce** after he headbutted Verona striker Thomas Henry.

RALPH HASENHUTTL
The ex-Southampton manager took charge of **Wolfsburg**, replacing the departed Niko Kovac.

RAFAEL BENITEZ
Celta Vigo sacked the 63-year-old, with B Team boss Claudio Giraldez replacing him.

PEPE MEL & JOSE RAMON SANDOVAL
La Liga's bottom two clubs both appointed new managers, with Mel joining **Almeria** and Sandoval taking charge of **Granada**.

ANTOINE KOMBOUARE
Ligue 1 strugglers **Nantes** changed manager for the second time this season, with former coach Kombouare replacing Jocelyn Gourvennec.

NEIL WARNOCK
The veteran manager stepped down from his role at **Aberdeen** after just 33 days in charge.

RONNY DEILA
Club Brugge fired their head coach, with Nicky Hayen replacing him for the rest of the season.

VALERIEN ISMAEL
Watford sacked the Frenchman, their 20th manager since 2020. Former England midfielder Tom Cleverley took caretaker charge of the team.

RIK DE MIL
Westerlo fired their manager, releasing a statement which said: "We cannot accept our values and standards being called into question." On the final day of the regular Belgian league season, De Mil's side settled for a 1-1 draw with Genk, with the closing stages petering out as the result suited both teams' ambitions. Just days later, De Mil took charge of **Charleroi**.

MAGNE HOSETH
Lyngby sacked their manager after just 50 days and two matches in charge of the team.

ERIC DIER
The centre-back will stay at **Bayern Munich** in 2024-25 after triggering a one-year contract.

CONNOR WICKHAM
The ex-England U21 striker joined League One side **Charlton Athletic** on a short-term deal.

JACK PRICE
After six years with MLS side Colorado Rapids, the English midfielder joined **Shrewsbury Town**.

JURGEN LOCADIA
The former Brighton striker joined Spanish second-tier outfit **Amorebieta**, having left Chinese side Cangzhou Mighty Lions in January.

PAPE CHEIKH
The former Senegal midfielder, once a €10m buy for Lyon, joined Slovakian side **DAC** as a free agent, having been released by Elche last year.

GYLFI SIGURDSSON
Icelandic side **Valur** signed the ex-Everton man.

LUCAS BERGSTROM
The 21-year-old Finland goalkeeper joined Swedish side **Brommapojkarna** on loan from Chelsea until the end of the year.

AHMED MUSA
The Nigeria forward, formerly of Leicester City, was released by Turkish side **Sivasspor**.

SOUTH AMERICA

ALEXANDRO BERNABEI & RAFAEL BORRE
Brazilian side **Internacional** signed Argentine left-back Bernabei on loan from Celtic and Colombia striker Borre from Eintracht Frankfurt.

FERNANDO
The former Porto, Manchester City, Galatasaray and Sevilla midfielder also joined **Internacional**.

LEO ORTIZ
Flamengo paid €7m to sign the centre-back from fellow Brazilian side Red Bull Bragantino.

LUIZ FELIPE SCOLARI
Atletico Mineiro sacked the experienced coach, with former Argentinos Juniors and Estudiantes boss Gabriel Milito replacing him at the helm.

OSCAR ROMERO
The 58-cap Paraguay international joined Brazilian side **Botafogo** two months after he was released by Turkish side Pendikspor.

AFRICA

LUIS BOA MORTE
Fulham's first-team coach will take charge of **Guinea-Bissau** this summer.

BRAHIM DIAZ
The Real Madrid youngster announced that he would represent **Morocco** instead of Spain.

Debut…Brahim Diaz starred in Morocco's 1-0 win v Angola in March

ASIA

BART RAMSELAAR
The ex-PSV and Netherlands midfielder left Utrecht for Singaporean side **Lion City Sailors**.

CONCACAF

RICHIE LARYEA
The Canada wing-back left Nottingham Forest to rejoin MLS side **Toronto FC** for $750,000.

LIEL ABADA
Charlotte FC signed the 22-year-old Israel winger from Celtic for a reported fee of $8m.

DEANDRE YEDLIN
The USA right-back, formerly of Newcastle United, joined **FC Cincinnati** from Inter Miami.

ESM XI

EUROPEAN SPORTS MEDIA

FEBRUARY 2024

SEASON RANKINGS
Cumulative votes through the season

GOALKEEPERS

Yann Sommer (Internazionale)	22
Wojciech Szczesny (Juventus)	8
Marcin Bulka (Nice)	6
Lukas Hradecky (Bayer Leverkusen)	6
Alisson (Liverpool)	4
Andriy Lunin (Real Madrid)	3
Ederson (Manchester City)	2
Kepa Arrizabalaga (Real Madrid)	1
Lucas Chevalier (Lille)	1
Paulo Gazzaniga (Girona)	1
Kamil Grabara (Copenhagen)	1
Gregor Kobel (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Mike Maignan (Milan)	1
Emiliano Martinez (Aston Villa)	1
Manuel Neuer (Bayern Munich)	1
Jan Oblak (Atletico Madrid)	1
Andre Onana (Manchester United)	1
Ivan Provedel (Lazio)	1
David Raya (Arsenal)	1
Marc-Andre ter Stegen (Barcelona)	1

DEFENDERS

Alex Grimaldo (Bayer Leverkusen)	27
Virgil van Dijk (Liverpool)	22
Dani Carvajal (Real Madrid)	15
Jonathan Tah (Bayer Leverkusen)	14
Trent Alexander-Arnold (Liverpool)	13
Jeremie Frimpong (Bayer Leverkusen)	12
Bremer (Juventus)	8
Federico Dimarco (Internazionale)	8
Kyle Walker (Manchester City)	8
Alessandro Bastoni (Internazionale)	7
Antonio Rudiger (Real Madrid)	7
Josko Gvardiol (Manchester City)	5
Benjamin Pavard (Internazionale)	5
Ruben Dias (Manchester City)	4
Gabriel (Arsenal)	4
Piero Hincapie (Bayer Leverkusen)	4
Cristian Romero (Tottenham Hotspur)	4
Jean-Clair Todibo (Nice)	4
Micky van de Ven (Tottenham Hotspur)	4
Francesco Acerbi (Internazionale)	3
Joao Cancelo (Barcelona)	3
Alphonso Davies (Bayern Munich)	3
Stefan de Vrij (Internazionale)	3
Federico Gatti (Juventus)	3
Achraf Hakimi (Paris Saint-Germain)	3
Mats Hummels (Borussia Dortmund)	3
Odilon Kossounou (Bayer Leverkusen)	3
William Saliba (Arsenal)	3
Ben White (Arsenal)	3
Waldemar Anton (Stuttgart)	2
Ronald Araujo (Barcelona)	2
Conor Bradley (Liverpool)	2
Yan Couto (Girona)	2
Dante (Nice)	2
Denzel Dumfries (Internazionale)	2
Mario Hermoso (Atletico Madrid)	2
Arthur Masuaku (Besiktas)	2
Nicolas Otamendi (Benfica)	2
Andy Robertson (Liverpool)	2
Kieran Trippier (Newcastle United)	2
Dayot Upamecano (Bayern Munich)	2
Axel Witsel (Atletico Madrid)	2
Nathan Ake (Manchester City)	1
David Alaba (Real Madrid)	1
Sam Beukema (Bologna)	1
Daley Blind (Girona)	1
Olivier Boscagli (PSV)	1
Andreas Christensen (Barcelona)	1
Sebastian Coates (Sporting)	1
Danilo (Juventus)	1
Oscar De Marcos (Athletic Club)	1
Zeno Debast (Anderlecht)	1
Eric Garcia (Girona)	1
Miguel Gutierrez (Girona)	1
Goncalo Inacio (Sporting)	1
Jules Kounde (Barcelona)	1
Tino Livramento (Newcastle United)	1
Koki Machida (Union Saint-Gilloise)	1
Maximilian Mittelstadt (Stuttgart)	1
Nahuel Molina (Atletico Madrid)	1
Stefan Posch (Bologna)	1
Luca Ranieri (Fiorentina)	1
David Raum (RB Leipzig)	1
Nico Schlotterbeck (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Niklas Sule (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Edmond Tapsoba (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Filippo Terracciano (Milan)	1
Jordan Teze (PSV)	1
Fikayo Tomori (Milan)	1
William Troost-Ekong (PAOK)	1
Destiny Udogie (Tottenham Hotspur)	1
Lucas Vazquez (Real Madrid)	1
Leny Yoro (Lille)	1

MIDFIELDERS

Jude Bellingham (Real Madrid)	39
Rodri (Manchester City)	13
Florian Wirtz (Bayer Leverkusen)	13
James Maddison (Tottenham Hotspur)	9
Hakan Calhanoglu (Internazionale)	8
Kevin De Bruyne (Manchester City)	7
Toni Kroos (Real Madrid)	7
Martin Odegaard (Arsenal)	7
Granit Xhaka (Bayer Leverkusen)	6
Phil Foden (Manchester City)	5
Jamal Musiala (Bayern Munich)	4
Declan Rice (Arsenal)	4
Dominik Szoboszlai (Liverpool)	4
Adrien Rabiot (Juventus)	3
Joey Veerman (PSV)	3
Vitinha (Paris Saint-Germain)	3
Nicolo Barella (Internazionale)	2
Aleix Garcia (Girona)	2
Yangel Herrera (Girona)	2
Curtis Jones (Liverpool)	2
Douglas Luiz (Aston Villa)	2
John McGinn (Aston Villa)	2
Henrikh Mkhitaryan (Internazionale)	2
Ismael Saibari (PSV)	2
Bernardo Silva (Manchester City)	2
Giacomo Bonaventura (Fiorentina)	1
Maxence Caqueret (Lyon)	1
Frenkie de Jong (Barcelona)	1
Charles De Ketelaere (Atalanta)	1
Rodrigo De Paul (Atletico Madrid)	1
Thomas Delaney (Anderlecht)	1
Wataru Endo (Liverpool)	1
Rasmus Falk (Copenhagen)	1
Chris Fuhrich (Stuttgart)	1
Gavi (Barcelona)	1
Pedro Goncalves (Sporting)	1
Pascal Gross (Brighton & Hove Albion)	1
Isco (Real Betis)	1
Joshua Kimmich (Bayern Munich)	1
Teun Koopmeiners (Atalanta)	1
Takefusa Kubo (Real Sociedad)	1
Mohammed Kudus (West Ham United)	1
Enzo Le Fee (Rennes)	1
Pierre Lees-Melou (Brest)	1

Ruben Loftus-Cheek (Milan)	1
Ivan Martin (Girona)	1
Weston McKennie (Juventus)	1
Scott McTominay (Manchester United)	1
Kaoru Mitoma (Brighton & Hove Albion)	1
Exequiel Palacios (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Cole Palmer (Chelsea)	1
Lucas Paqueta (West Ham United)	1
Tijjani Reijnders (Milan)	1
Rodrigo Riquelme (Atletico Madrid)	1
Marcel Sabitzer (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Xavi Simons (RB Leipzig)	1
Federico Valverde (Real Madrid)	1
Warren Zaire-Emery (Paris Saint-Germain)	1

FORWARDS

Harry Kane (Bayern Munich)	30
Lautaro Martinez (Internazionale)	26
Erling Haaland (Manchester City)	18
Kylian Mbappe (Paris Saint-Germain)	14
Serhou Guirassy (Stuttgart)	9
Rodrygo (Real Madrid)	9
Mohamed Salah (Liverpool)	9
Son Heung-min (Tottenham Hotspur)	8
Artem Dovbyk (Girona)	7
Bukayo Saka (Arsenal)	7
Antoine Griezmann (Atletico Madrid)	6
Victor Boniface (Bayer Leverkusen)	5
Viktor Gyokeres (Sporting)	5
Vinicius Junior (Real Madrid)	5
Alvaro Morata (Atletico Madrid)	4
Dusan Vlahovic (Juventus)	4
Julian Alvarez (Manchester City)	2
Jeremy Doku (Manchester City)	2
Evanilson (Porto)	2
Santiago Gimenez (Feyenoord)	2
Sebastien Haller (Borussia Dortmund)	2
Diogo Jota (Liverpool)	2
Leroy Sane (Bayern Munich)	2
Rafa Silva (Benfica)	2
Lamine Yamal (Barcelona)	2
Jarrod Bowen (West Ham United)	1
Memphis Depay (Atletico Madrid)	1
Luis Diaz (Liverpool)	1
Paulo Dybala (Roma)	1
Edin Dzeko (Fenerbahce)	1
Niclas Fullkrug (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Alejandro Garnacho (Manchester United)	1
Rasmus Hojlund (Manchester United)	1
Mauro Icardi (Galatasaray)	1
Robert Lewandowski (Barcelona)	1
Romelu Lukaku (Roma)	1
Riccardo Orsolini (Bologna)	1
Victor Osimhen (Napoli)	1
Savio (Girona)	1
Patrik Schick (Bayer Leverkusen)	1
Dominic Solanke (Bournemouth)	1
Marcus Thuram (Internazionale)	1
Ayase Ueda (Feyenoord)	1
Deniz Undav (Stuttgart)	1
Ollie Watkins (Aston Villa)	1

ESM MEMBERS: *A Bola* (Portugal), *Fanatik* (Turkey), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Germany), *La Gazzetta dello Sport* (Italy), *Kicker* (Germany), *Marca* (Spain), *Nemzeti Sport* (Hungary), *Sport/Foot* (Belgium), *De Telegraaf* (Netherlands), *Tipsbladet* (Denmark), *ELF Voetbal* (Netherlands), *World Soccer* (England)

OCEANIA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

As the 2024 OFC Champions League prepares for kick-off, a new tournament is on the horizon for Oceanian clubs

Words: Steve Menary

Tahiti will host the 16th modern iteration of the Oceania Champions League in May but just as the competition is showing signs of maturing, its future as the region's premier club tournament is under threat.

First staged back in 1987 as the Oceania Club Championship, the competition became the Oceania Football Confederation (OFC) Champions League in 2007 and has since been dominated by clubs from New Zealand.

Since Australia's move to the Asian Football Confederation in 2006, clubs from New Zealand have won 13 out of 15 titles including last year when Auckland City won their second consecutive title and their 11th in all.

Since 2011, only a solitary success by New Caledonian club Hienghene Sport in 2019 and the subsequent COVID-19 pandemic has interrupted the Kiwi dominance. New Zealand's representatives, Auckland City, will be favourites again for this year's tournament at the 11,700-capacity Stade Pater in Papeete.

Previous tournaments were also not helped by an over-reliance on New Zealand as hosts, but three out of the last four tournaments have been staged elsewhere.

Over the course of these events, the competition has shown signs of maturing with Hienghene Sport winning as hosts in 2019 and Fiji's representatives Suva taking Auckland City to extra-time in a thrilling final in Vanuatu last year before going down 4-2.

Last year's tournament also benefitted from a strong performance by the home side, Ifira Black Bird, who finished runners-up in Group B and only lost in the semi-finals to eventual champions Auckland City on penalties after a 2-2 draw. The champions of the Port Vila Football League return again in 2024 but face a tough group.

Only two clubs from Vanuatu have ever reached the final in the various iterations of the competition – Tafea in 2001 and the now defunct Amicale a decade later – and Ifira will bring a squad comprised solely of players from Vanuatu with attacking midfielder Godine Tenene the player to watch.

Tahiti will be represented by Pirae – who narrowly saw off Tefana on penaties in their national play-off – and the OFC and Tahitian Football Federation will be hoping for another strong performance by the host side to boost crowds.

No club from Tahiti has ever won any of the competition's different iterations. Runners-up back in 2006, Pirae won Group B last year without losing a game but could not emulate Venus in 2022 by reaching the final, which was the first appearance by a Tahitian club in the showpiece match since Tefana lost to Auckland City a decade earlier.

AS Magenta from New Caledonia are likely to be the main threat to Pirae in Group B. AS Magenta were runners-up in 2005 and 2019 and have a number of players in the New Caledonia squad including experienced goalkeeper Mickael Ulile and exciting striker Gilbert Kugogne, who was given his first full international cap last year at the age of 19.

The other side in Group B are Samoa's Vaivase-Tai, who emerged triumphant from a qualifying round staged in the Tongan capital of Nuku'alofa in February against the champions of the hosts, the Cook Islands and American Samoa.

Apart from a 0-0 draw with home side Veitongo, Vaivase-Tai were barely tested in the qualifiers and will hope not to emulate last year's representatives from Samoa. Half a dozen of Lupe ole Soaga's

Up for grabs...the OFC Champions League trophy

players were ruled unfit by the competition's local medical officer after their second game and, with such a weakened side, opted not to take to the field for their final game, leading to all three of their fixtures retrospectively ruled as 3-0 walkovers.

The introduction of a qualifying round makes sense in reducing the potential of one-sided games with the "best of the rest" taking part. The OFC will hope that Vaivase-Tai – seven-times champions of the Samoa National League – will be better prepared than Lupe ole Soaga were last time around.

In Group A, Auckland City are the obvious favourites, but face three difficult matches and will certainly not underestimate Fiji's representatives after their experience in the 2023 final.

Last year's runners-up Suva will not return, with Rewa – national champions for the first time in 2022 and runners-up in 2023 – representing Fiji instead. The Nausori-based club's only appearance in the OFC Champions League was as one of three Fijian representatives in 2017, when the competition was played under a different format. In Tahiti, Fijian international midfielder Tevita Waranaivalu and promising young winger Asivorosi Rabo will be players to watch for Rewa.

Hekari United of Papua New Guinea are the only other club outside of New Zealand and New Caledonia to have won the title since 2006. Their triumph over two legs against Waitakere United back in 2010 was one of the competition's great upsets.

Hekari were subsequently overtaken domestically and after 2016 did not return to the Champions League until last year, when they fell in the group stage. After strolling past Port Moresby Strikers 5-0 on aggregate in this year's play-offs, Hekari will also present a strong challenge in Group A.

With a large number of players in the PNG national squad, such as the promising midfielder Yagi Yasasa and his midfield counterpart Joseph Joe, Hekari are in the ascendancy and experienced striker Ati Kepo will be looking to get on the scoresheet.

Winners of the S-League for the last two seasons, Solomon Warriors from the Solomon Islands were frustrated at losing their final-game showdown with Suva in last year's group stage and will be eager to progress this time around.

With Tahiti also hosting the surfing competition in this year's Olympic Games, the hosts will be well organised and the 2024 OFC Champions League promises to be another tight competition just as its future comes into question.

The lucrative prize for the winners was a place at the FIFA Club World Cup, but Auckland City have already bagged Oceania's spot at the expanded 2025 event after winning the last two Champions League titles. The winners in Tahiti will instead play in FIFA's new Intercontinental Cup for the champions of each confederation due to be staged in December 2024.

These changes come as plans for a proposed professional league across the Pacific – that could overshadow the Champions League – edge forward. The plans date back to 2019 and the formation of a taskforce to investigate its viability, only for the COVID-19 pandemic to intervene. In October 2022, FIFA pledged support at the OFC's congress in New Zealand and a month later, the OFC Executive Committee approved plans for the league with a 2025 start date.

Gianni Infantino said that he was "200 per cent" behind the plans last summer, but details remain scarce other than a pledge to use the Video Assistant Referee (VAR) for the games as development has been slow. In December 2023, Tonga Football Association president Lord Ve'ehala told *RNZ Pacific*: "The plan is still on

Oceania champions... **Auckland City celebrate winning the 2023 OFC Champions League**
Credit: PhototekNZ/OFC

Finalists...Ravnesh Karan Singh of Suva and Auckland City's Dylan Manickum in the 2023 OFC Champions League final
Credit: PhototekNZ/OFC

Breaking the cycle...New Caledonia's Hienghene Sport were the last team from outside New Zealand to win the OFC Champions League, claiming the trophy on home soil in 2019

the planning side, and it is slow to implement. The plan is for all the 11 members associations. There have been some countries showing some interest but the implementation of the plan is the most challenging phase."

OFC clubs and leagues manager Steven Dillon has been working on the plans and has recruited an external consultant, Paul Woodland, who travelled to the Pacific in March for meetings with member associations.

Some OFC members, such as Fiji and Vanuatu, have already begun exploring the viability of professionalising their own domestic competitions to take part in the mooted Pro League. One concern among members is that the Pro League will provide qualification to FIFA's Club World Cup.

The OFC plans to launch an extensive Expression of Interest process soon to allow interested clubs to explore the viability of taking part. In a statement, the OFC told *World Soccer:* "The OFC Professional League is a new standalone competition that would run in addition to the current OFC Champions League as well as the National Domestic Leagues from the Member Associations of OFC.

"The eventual formation and composition of the league would be established in a way which would enhance the current National Domestic League set up across each Member Association and ensure players can play at the highest possible level for longer.

"The number of teams and club types will be determined by the ongoing research that is taking place from the OFC Pro League Taskforce. The intention is to ensure that club management capabilities and management structures can maintain the long-term commitment required for the successful establishment and launch of the league."

> "The OFC Professional League is a new standalone competition that would run in addition to the current OFC Champions League as well as the National Domestic Leagues from the Member Associations of OFC"
>
> Oceania Football Confederation

As laudable as the concept certainly is in aiding local development and boosting national teams in the World Cup qualifiers in a region often dominated by both rugby codes, funding will be a sticking point.

FIFA appears willing to underwrite what would be a costly project, not least in terms of travel, but what remains unclear is how many clubs will take part from each country. If only a handful of clubs from each country are able to participate and can then provide opportunities for players to turn professional, those sides would dominate domestic competitions, leaving football in Oceania in a similar state to Europe.

2024 OFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE THE DRAW

GROUP A

- **Auckland City** *(New Zealand)*
- **Solomon Warriors** *(Solomon Islands)*
- **Hekari United** *(Papua New Guinea)*
- **Rewa** *(Fiji)*

GROUP B

- **Pirae** *(Tahiti)*
- **Vaivase-Tai** *(Samoa)*
- **Ifira Black Bird** *(Vanuatu)*
- **AS Magenta** *(New Caledonia)*

FIFA-backed...Gianni Infantino is "200 per cent" behind the OFC Pro League proposals

Stuck in second tier...Hamburg supporters react to missing out on promotion last season

STUCK IN SECOND TIER

Everywhere you look in German football there are teams who have seen better days. Nick Bidwell takes a closer look at some of the 2. Bundesliga's fallen giants

Whatever the terminology employed – temporarily embarrassed, on the slide, sleeping giants – the German second tier is absolutely jam-packed with big-name clubs trying to adjust to harder times, never quite knowing which way to face, either ruefully looking back on the glory days or plotting a path to a renaissance.

No fewer than 11 participants in the current 2. Bundesliga were once national champions: Schalke, Karlsruhe, Fortuna Dusseldorf, Greuther Furth, Hannover, Hertha Berlin, Holstein Kiel, Hamburg, Eintracht Braunschweig, Nuremberg and Kaiserslautern – the latter four of which have been crowned champions since the Bundesliga was founded in 1963. Indeed, of the nine clubs with the most German league titles, four compete in today's second division: Nuremberg (with nine), Schalke (seven), Hamburg (six) and Kaiserslautern (four).

Nor is there a shortage of European pedigree. Hamburg won the European Cup in 1983 and the Cup Winners' Cup in 1977; Schalke lifted the UEFA Cup in 1997; Magdeburg, once one of East Germany's top dogs, won the European Cup Winners' Cup in 1974; Dusseldorf reached the final of the same competition in 1979, while Karlsruhe, featuring goalkeeping great Oliver Kahn, reached the semi-finals of the UEFA Cup in 1994.

Some of the most popular clubs in the country are to be found here: Schalke with its 174,000 members, Hamburg (95,000) and Hertha Berlin (46,000). Despite their struggles, all three teams' average attendances for this season are in the top ten in the country. In total, nine present-day 2. Bundesliga clubs boast membership rolls of at least 20,000.

So, what does the future hold for these sleeping giants? Are they set to slumber on indefinitely, or are some of them beginning to stir?

Hamburg

There was a distinct air of inevitability to Hamburg's decision to fire coach Tim Walter in February. Despite spending most of the current campaign in the top three of the 2. Bundesliga, Hamburg under Walter regularly failed to convince, shoddy and careless at the back and terribly inconsistent, making a habit of dropping points against weaker opponents. Given the quality of their squad they should have been running away with the league, but even before Christmas rumours were swirling that director of sport Jonas Boldt was preparing to pull the plug on Walter, who had been at the club since the summer of 2021.

This is a club where expectations are gargantuan and patience is in short supply. Three-time Bundesliga champions (and six-time national champions overall) and a force in Europe in the 1970s and '80s, HSV were a proud ever-present in the Bundesliga prior to falling through the trapdoor in 2018. They assumed the old order would be immediately restored but, six years later, their boat has yet to come in. They have never finished lower than fourth in the second tier, suffering play-off defeats in each of the last two seasons, but promotion continues to elude them.

To fill the void left by Walter, Hamburg appointed the ex-Paderborn and Cologne coach Steffen Baumgart, a boss known for the flat cap seemingly welded to his head, his volatility and passion on the touchline and his risk-embracing mentality. Thus far, though, the arch-motivator has found it difficult to spark an improvement. Two of his first three games ended in losses and the fans are, to put it mildly, restless. After a recent defeat in Dusseldorf, a number of HSV fans were even calling for the reinstatement of Tim Walter. "We're way off how we want to play," sighed Baumgart. "There's a huge amount we have to change."

Parachuted in...Hamburg's new head coach Steffen Baumgart replaced Tim Walter in late February

Hannover

It should come as no surprise that many lovers of the beautiful game in Germany are delighted that Hannover have not returned to the Bundesliga fold since their relegation from the top flight in 2019. The reason? The overtly business-class instincts of the club's long-serving president Martin Kind.

For many supporters up and down country, Kind, an optician and hearing aid entrepreneur, is nothing less than the big bad wolf, the commercial agitator who constantly calls for the abolition of German football's 50+1 ownership rule (in which club members call the shots rather than external investors) and is believed to have voted in favour of a German League (DFL) scheme to raise private equity cash against TV rights, a plan that was originally voted through by 24 of the 36 clubs comprising the top two tiers but was subsequently scrapped following widespread fan protests. Even his own supporters, it seems, have now turned against him.

Unpopular... Hannover fans raise a banner of their owner Martin Kind

Hannover, part of the Bundesliga furniture for 30 campaigns in various spells, probably have too much to do to clinch one of the two automatic 2. Bundesliga promotion spots, but a play-off berth remains within reach. Coached by the former Ingolstadt and Greuther Furth boss, Stefan Leitl, they have started the second half of the 2023-24 campaign in fine fettle, only tasting defeat in one of their first eight encounters of 2024 and picking up 15 points from a possible 24.

Much will depend on the experienced steering committee formed by goalkeeper Ron-Robert Zieler and Germany defender Marcel Halstenberg, who returned to his home region last summer following eight successful seasons with RB Leipzig. Equally important is 19-year-old Nicolo Tresoldi, an Italian-born striker of much promise, who has a place in Germany's Under-21 squad and a reputation for clinical finishing.

Hansa Rostock

In a season in which their side is in real danger of slipping out of the second tier, Rostock supporters of a certain vintage might prefer to tune out and cast their minds back to far better times, the golden era of 1995-2005 when the unfashionable club from the Baltic coast successfully went toe-to-toe with the best in the Bundesliga. A tough-as-nails collective boasting the individual class of Stefan Beinlich, Oliver Neuville, Jonathan Akpoborie and Sergej Barbarez, the Hansa of that period were a match for anyone, good enough to twice achieve a sixth-place finish – in 1995-96 and 1997-98 – their highest-ever Bundesliga placing.

Battling the drop...Hansa Rostock fans

Prior to the recent success story of Union Berlin, the Rostocker were the original trailblazers for eastern clubs making good in the reunified Germany. Sadly, though, the good times were not to last, as their top-flight competitiveness was eroded by the sale of too many key players, too much faith in inadequate coaches and a lack of sponsorship cash in one of the country's poorest regions. Relegated from the Bundesliga in 2005, they did manage to bounce back a couple of seasons later, but were promptly demoted again and have operated a ghost train shuttle service between the second and third tiers ever since.

Incredible to think that they started this season on a high, taking maximum points from their first two games and occupying the top of the table. A false dawn, however. Understandably for a club that went nuclear in last summer's transfer market – bringing in 12 new signings and letting 13 go – they seem desperately short of cohesion and are among the worst in the league for possession numbers, fouls committed and run intensity. New coach Mersad Selimbegovic has his hands full.

Schalke

The massed ranks of the Gelsenkirchen club's fanbase, emotionally worn down by defeat after defeat this term, have become sadly accustomed to singing the blues. Sufficiently accomplished to qualify for the knockout phase of the Champions League five years ago – eventually losing heavily in the last 16 to Manchester City – the Ruhr outfit have sunk like a stone since then, twice falling out of the Bundesliga and now facing the doomsday scenario of back-to-back relegations.

While the nightmarish prospect of playing in the German third tier will frighten the life out of the Royal Blues, it could get worse. Weighed down by reported debts of around €165 million, Schalke are at risk of being rejected a licence to compete in the 3. Liga. If that happens, they will cease to exist in their current form, compelled to start over as an amateur outfit in the lowest reaches of the German pyramid.

For now, surviving in the second division is the be-all and end-all for the Royal Blues. It should be noted that the DFL, which runs the 2. Bundesliga, is not as financially demanding as the federation-controlled third tier. In the second division, an economic health-check relates mainly to a club's growth potential. By way of contrast, third division watchdogs assess a club's own capital, which in Schalke's case is in a catastrophic state.

How did a German football institution fall apart so fast? The answer, in a nutshell, is a boardroom comedy of errors: the out of control egos of several individuals in positions of power, too many panicky, ill-judged signings, often paying over the odds for mediocrity, and a revolving carousel of head coaches. Since March 2011, when Felix Magath was ousted, no fewer than 21 changes have been made in the technical area.

A recent 3-1 home victory over league leaders St Pauli was just what the doctor ordered. Another reason to believe is the emergence of brilliant Germany Under-20 striker Keke Topp.

Ray of hope...young Schalke striker Keke Topp in action against Holstein Kiel in this season's 2. Bundesliga

30 IN-DEMAND COACHES

Ahead of a summer that will be packed with lots of managerial moves and rumours, Nick Bidwell takes a closer look at the most in-demand coaches

It will take a fairly seismic event for January 26 not to go down as the most chaotic day of 2024 for the UK's sporting media. On that day, Jurgen Klopp announced that this would be his last season with Liverpool after eight-and-a-half years at Anfield and, in response, TV stations, news websites and social media exploded.

The reaction to Barcelona's announcement a day later that their coach, Xavi, would also step down at the end of the season was less tumultuous – unsurprisingly, given Barca's stuttering form - and when Bayern Munich confirmed that they would be waving goodbye to head coach Thomas Tuchel this summer, the only surprise was that they weren't parting ways sooner.

Nevertheless, the upshot of all of the above is that three of Europe's biggest clubs are searching for new managers to lead them into 2024-25. Throw in the continuing struggles of Premier League giants Chelsea and Manchester United, plus the inevitable chopping and changing of coaches that will follow the European Championship and Copa America tournaments, and this summer could see unprecedented levels of high-profile managerial changes.

Bayer Leverkusen's Xabi Alonso is perhaps the most in-demand, but he is not the only exciting young coach, nor indeed the only Spanish coach attracting attention. Elsewhere, the Premier League is currently home to a number of impressive managerial talents while other coaches forge their reputations in smaller leagues, with some of the most famous managers in the game out of work and ready to dive back in.

In the race for some of the most prestigious roles in world football, who will come out on top?

Xabi ALONSO

'An elite coach any club would love to employ'

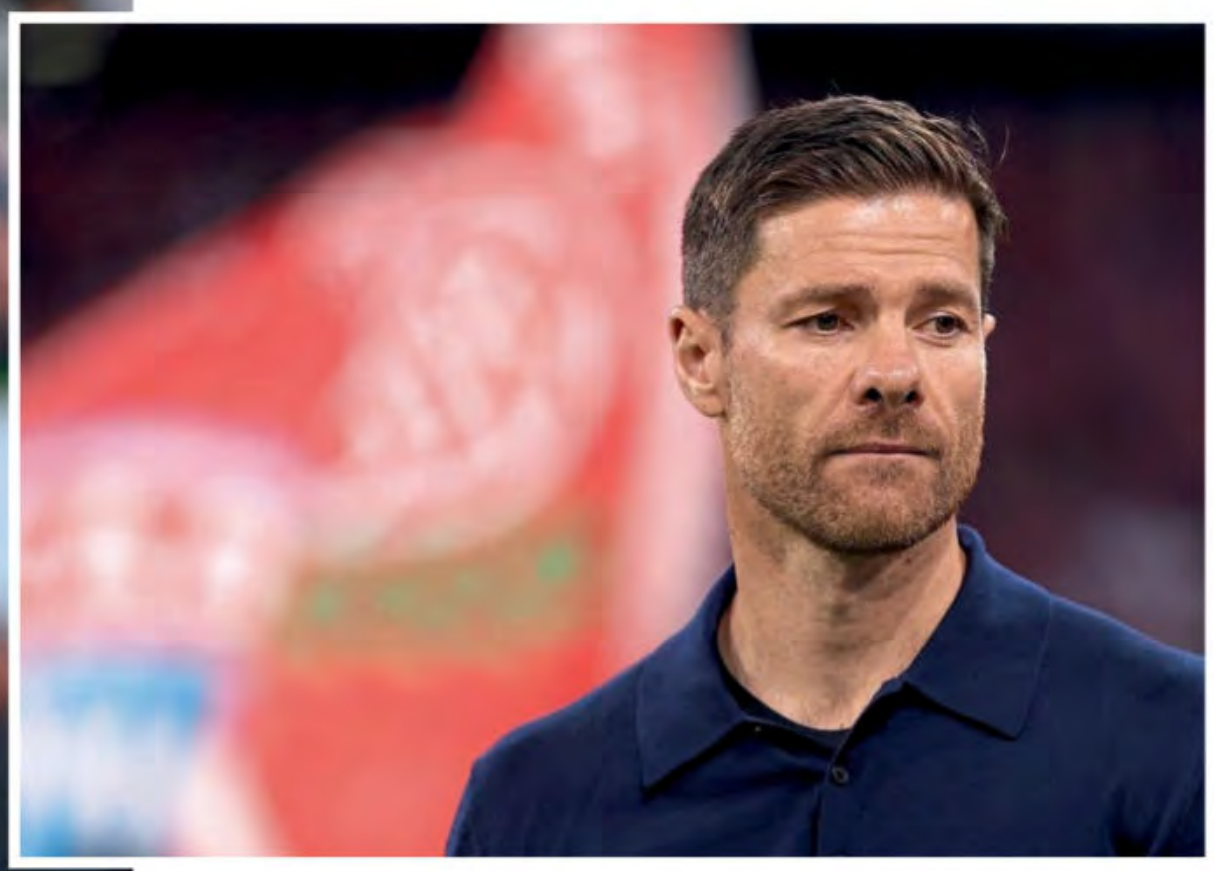
His stock sky-high after sensationally transforming Leverkusen from relegation candidates into Bundesliga champions-elect, the Basque maestro no longer needs to send his agent Inaki Ibanez to prospect for job offers. No ifs, buts or maybes, Alonso is now an elite coach that any club would dearly love to employ.

At a time laden with serendipity, two of the clubs he used to play for, Liverpool and Bayern, will both have a managerial vacancy to fill in the summer and in something of a feeding frenzy, English and German scribes have dived head-first into the propaganda war, busy building a case for the 42-year-old to join their club of choice.

The pro-Liverpool brigade believe they have the edge, barely able to hide their glee when announcing that the Merseysiders have contacted Alonso's representatives and ever ready to voice the opinion that Alonso was

Hot property ...Xabi Alonso

Anfield favourite... Alonso spent five years at Liverpool



Back at Bayern...Alonso's Bayer Leverkusen side drew 2-2 at the Allianz Arena in September

bound to prefer the ambience and stability of Liverpool to the much more uncertain situation at Bayern, where player power rules and a large-scale squad cull will soon be underway.

Inevitably, the Bayern camp see the tug-of-war in an altogether different light. The club and its media outriders are confident Alonso would relish the challenge of an Allianz-Arena rebuild, arguing that a contract in the Bavarian capital would be far less taxing than following in the massive footsteps of the inimitable Jurgen Klopp.

In all the talk of Liverpool and Bayern jostling for position, it seems to have been forgotten that Alonso does have other options, the most significant of which is staying put in Leverkusen, where he is under contract until the summer of 2026. Continuing the fairy tale into the Champions League would certainly appeal. He has only been in charge at the BayArena since the autumn of 2022 and may feel there is unfinished business to attend to. Loyalty to the Rhinelanders may trump everything.

Staying put might also open up the possibility of taking charge of one of his other former clubs further down the line. Real Madrid recently extended Carlo Ancelotti's contract – also until 2026. Perhaps it's just a coincidence, but the timing could work perfectly for Xabi to step into the Italian's shoes.

Throughout his coaching career, Alonso has been careful not to put the cart before the horse, to prefer small incremental steps over jumping in at the deep end. Whether working with youngsters at Madrid, the Real Sociedad B team or a medium-sized club such as Leverkusen, Alonso has stuck to his own pragmatic learning curve. He now has a huge decision to make: will he plump for the steady-as-she-goes course, or throw in his lot with the establishment?

FREE AGENTS

Jose **MOURINHO**
Where next for Jose following his Roma exit? The answer depends on his appetite: a lucrative offer in the Saudi league might appeal, but Napoli, Fenerbahce or Newcastle would get his competitive juices flowing. A job in international football is also an option.

Antonio **CONTE**
Out of work since leaving Tottenham Hotspur last March, Italian football insiders claim the ex-Juventus, Italy, Chelsea and Inter boss is first choice to replace Milan head coach Stefano Pioli. Other clubs may be wary of his demanding and tempestuous style.

Zinedine **ZIDANE**
Three years since quitting Real Madrid, Zizou's sabbatical has run its course. Long regarded as France's next boss, Didier Deschamps' contract to 2026 means that it will take an early exit from Euro 2024 to open up that job. Only huge clubs will be of interest.

Graham **POTTER**
Has been wary about diving into a new job after the Chelsea catastrophe, reportedly turning down Sweden, but still has plenty of credit in the bank. Could reunite with his ex-Brighton colleague Dan Ashworth if the latter joins Manchester United as a director.

Ruben **AMORIM**

'Sporting's first league title winner in 19 years'

If a sustained period of success is a prerequisite for a coach to upgrade his surroundings, the 39-year-old Sporting boss should have no worries at all. Since taking over at Sporting in March 2020, his Midas touch has been there for all to see, leading the Lions to the Portuguese league title in his first full season in charge (2020-21) – the club's first championship triumph in 19 years – the Primeira Liga runners-up spot 12 months later, two League Cups (2020-21 and 2021-22) and good progress in the 2021-22 Champions League, when the Green-and-White hoops qualified for the knockout phase for only the second time in the club's history.

Amorim also emerged smiling after a string of fine wins in Europe last season, defeating Tottenham and Eintracht Frankfurt in the Champions League group stage and then Arsenal on penalties in the last 16 of the Europa League. Up against such outstanding coaches as Antonio Conte, Oliver Glasner and Mikel Arteta, he arguably outsmarted them all.

Title winner... Amorim celebrates winning the 2020-21 Portuguese league title with his players

His Sporting side are currently slugging it out with arch-rivals Benfica for supremacy in this season's Primeira Liga, and many believe that the present-day iteration of the Lions is arguably the best he has produced in his four-year tenure: an exceptional mix of rock-solid defence, a voracious press in the opposition half and a great deal of lively interchanging of attacking personnel. He usually employs a 3-4-3 system in which balance is the watchword; no more than five players on attacking duty and the same number minding the store to the rear.

Able to take Sporting to a new, higher dimension, Amorim has been particularly successful in the commitment to excellence messages he has drummed into his squad. He insists that a club of Sporting's standing must always be in contention for prizes and the players have readily embraced that uncompromising direction of travel. It's his good fortune too that he works at a club with one of the most prolific academies in Europe and, true to that tradition, he has never shirked from giving chances to up-and-coming talent. Should he decide to leave the Jose Alvalade Stadium this summer, he would be well advised to go to a club where tyros are cherished, not merely tolerated.

A consummate media performer, jovial, eloquent and good to listen to, he is not one to waste his time on conspiracy theories and feuding with other coaches. Not for him the abrasiveness and controversy so often sparked by fellow Portuguese bosses Jose Mourinho and Sergio Conceicao at Porto.

Young coach... Ruben Amorim

Will **STILL**
The technical area prodigy, who first became a head coach in Belgium with Lierse at the tender age of 24, is now the much-respected boss of Ligue 1 Reims and his reputation as a wonderkid coach will make him a target for clubs in England.

Francesco **FARIOLI**
With Nice ensconced in the Ligue 1 top two in the first half of the season, the Italian, 34, had admirers galore. Any imminent swoops for his services, though, may have been delayed by a poor run of results that have seen Nice slide down the table.

Kieran **McKENNA**
If the 37-year-old ex-Manchester United assistant coach can complete the astonishing feat of steering Ipswich Town from the English third tier to the Premier League, he will stay at Portman Road. If not, other clubs will come calling.

Imanol **ALGUACIL**

'When he says he is in his dream job, he means it'

Dream job... Imanol Alguacil

It's almost impossible to imagine this proud Basque football man ever earning a living beyond the walls of his beloved Real Sociedad. Devoted to the San Sebastian club's cause, he has worked there in various roles for over two decades – nine years as a full-back, five years supervising the B team and six seasons and counting as head coach. When he says he is in his dream job, he means it with every fibre of his being.

But that's not to say that he will remain at the Estadio Anoeta forever. Nothing in this game is written in stone and both within and outside of Spain, clubs are anything but indifferent to his against-the-odds achievements at the Sociedad helm: the permanent encampment in the top six of La Liga, four consecutive qualifications for Europe, victory in the 2020 Copa del Rey – their first trophy in 34 years – the fourth-place domestic league finish last season that meant a return to the Champions League after a decade-long hiatus, and strong performances in that competition's group phase this term, topping a tough pool also featuring Benfica, Red Bull Salzburg and last year's finalists Internazionale.

Spain's Coach of the Year for 2022-23 not only delivers results – *La Real* play attractive and flamboyant attacking football, just as happy deftly and fluidly playing though the thirds as using physicality and athleticism to force the issue.

Barcelona, who have a long history of employing Basque personnel, have been admirers of his for quite some time. With then-Barca head coach Ronald Koeman struggling to put out a competitive side in the autumn of 2021, Camp Nou bosses were reported to be seriously tempted to replace the Dutchman with Imanol, only to decide to give Koeman more time.

When Koeman was eventually sacked in late October that same year, Alguacil's name was again in the *Blaugrana* frame, though once more it was not to be. "He [Alguacil] is a coach who Barca like a lot," recently claimed Ricardo Reyes, the presenter of Spanish football talkshow, *El Desmarque*. "Barca rang him twice before appointing Xavi. Joan Laporta, the Barca president, has said many times that he has a lot of big players who would be delighted if Imanol was their coach."

Barca recently got up close and personal with Imanol at an awards ceremony, where the Sociedad boss received his Coach of the Year gong. Joan Laporta reportedly told the Basque that he loved Sociedad's style of play.

Imanol was not especially quick or skilful as a player, but as he says himself: "I was one of those who strived the most". He is similarly dedicated to coaching, always prepared to go the extra mile, to put in more thought and effort than anybody else.

Garcia **PIMIENTA**
Once the highly successful leader of the Barcelona youth team, he has proved equally influential in his first senior role. In two years under his coaching, Las Palmas have risen from second division indifference to La Liga respectability.

Rafael **MARQUEZ**
The ex-Barcelona and Mexico *libero* or defensive midfielder has produced a fine body of work in two seasons in charge of the Barca B team – a role previously held by Juande Ramos, Pep Guardiola and Luis Enrique – regularly winning with an ever-changing group.

MICHEL
Inevitably, Girona's stunning emergence this term as a La Liga heavyweight has put a rocket booster underneath the profile of their "Madrileno" boss. As an employee of the City Football Group, he has plenty of networking opportunities.

Roberto **DE ZERBI**

'De Zerbi's Brighton resembles Pep Guardiola's Manchester City'

There is one reason why Brighton's Italian coach finds himself linked with a host of top jobs in Europe: he fearlessly loves to fight fire with fire. The 44-year-old native of the Lombardy city of Brescia may be employed at one of the least prestigious football locations in the English top flight, with Brighton only in the Premier League since 2017. But that has not prevented De Zerbi steadfastly standing up for the little guy. Always pro-active, never intimidated by the big guns, his Brighton side just love to go on the front foot and stay there.

Needless to say, the success De Zerbi has brought to Brighton since pitching up on the south coast in the autumn of 2022 – a fine sixth-place finish in the Premier League last term, more top-ten kudos this season and an abundance of major scalps – is testament to the Italian's flawless system and methodology. Even the smallest details are taken into account on the training ground, players are constantly reminded not to let their standards slip, and drive and belief are religiously promoted.

Toe-to-toe...De Zerbi takes on Pep Guardiola

Underdog talk is anathema to him. He demands bravery and positivity at all times and it's no coincidence that his Brighton very much resembles Pep Guardiola's Manchester City: the same press from the front, exceptionally high possession statistics, positional awareness, fluidity and the goals from midfield.

De Zerbi's Brighton are extremely tough to get to grips with. If opponents back off, the Seagulls accumulate even more control and pressure. Attempt to stifle them with an aggressive press and they have the technical nous to effortlessly play through. Whenever space opens up, De Zerbi's men are lightning fast to exploit it, going fast and vertical.

He is also an outstanding teacher, proving himself to be the perfect mentor for both Brighton academy graduates and the many talented young imports the club has brought in from abroad. As a developmental guru, he has few peers.

Bayern Munich's newly-installed board member for sport Max Eberl – effectively the head of recruitment at the club – is thought to be a big fan of De Zerbi. So are a number of leading outfits in Serie A (Juventus, Roma, Milan and Napoli) and La Liga giants Barcelona.

Brighton suits him very well. He has a fantastic stable of young talent at his disposal and does not have a huge amount of pressure to deal with. Familiarity or new horizons? Tough call.

Brighton boss... Roberto De Zerbi

Unai **EMERY**
While at the controls of Sevilla, Villarreal and now Aston Villa, Emery has repeatedly assembled teams worth far more than the sum of their parts. But his spells at PSG and Arsenal were less successful. Is Villa his ideal club?

Thomas **FRANK**
After six years of remarkable over-achievement at Brentford, the affable Dane fully deserves the chance to take up the reins at a club with European competition dimension. Adaptable, intelligent and enthusiastic.

Mikel **ARTETA**
In January, Arteta blasted reports suggesting he could replace Xavi as Barcelona coach this summer as "fake news" and "totally untrue". He seems far more intent on overseeing Arsenal blossom into a genuine national and international force.

Hansi **FLICK**

'The perceived brains behind Germany's 2014 World Cup win'

Dismissed...Flick watches his final game as Germany head coach, a 4-1 defeat to Japan

All the big clubs beating a path to the door of the former Bayern Munich and Germany head coach clearly do not think it important that Flick flopped in his two-year stint as *Bundestrainer*, overseeing a disastrous World Cup campaign in 2022 – the *Nationalmannschaft* failed to get out of their group – and losing four out of five friendlies in 2023 before finally being shown the door last September, thus becoming the first Germany boss to be sacked since the role came into existence in 1926.

The fact that assorted head-hunters rate Flick so highly is essentially a consequence of his magnificent results during a 19-month reign at Bayern Munich, whom he led to the treble of Champions League, Bundesliga and DFB-Pokal in 2019-20. An excellent man-manager with a team-player mindset and a sound grasp of tactical nuance, he scooped no fewer than seven trophies during that awe-inspiring spell at the Allianz Arena: two Bundesliga titles, a German Cup, Champions League, German Super Cup, Club World Cup and UEFA Super Cup. He would have stayed on much longer at Bayern if he had not fallen out with then-director of sport Hasan Salihamidzic.

Many in Germany like to think of him as the avuncular low-profile coach, who oils the wheels with great communication skills. In his eight years as Joachim Low's assistant – a golden epoch that featured four major tournament semi-finals and culminated with the World Cup victory in 2014 – a perception developed that Flick was the real brains behind the operation, hence the enthusiasm for his promotion to the top job in 2021.

The other factor in his favour is that, having been dismissed by the DFB, he will not be subject to any compensation or release fee, which will be particularly attractive to cash-strapped Barcelona.

In the wake of Xavi's decision to walk away from the Camp Nou at the end of the season, Flick has been strongly tipped to replace him. He is reportedly learning Spanish and his agent Pini Zahavi is on very friendly terms with the *Blaugrana* president Joan Laporta. Respected Spanish journalist Lu Martin recently broke the story of Flick going out to dinner in Manchester with one Pep Guardiola, taking the opportunity to pick the brains of the one-time Barca coach.

Meanwhile, closer to home, the *Bild* tabloid has claimed that a number of influential figures at Bayern Munich would not say no to Flick 2.0. Honorary Bayern president Uli Hoeness, who was not at all pleased when Flick stepped aside, has reportedly since had a clear-the-air meeting with Flick, and crucially Salihamidzic is no longer around. A return to Bayern remains a long shot, but stranger things have happened.

Gareth **SOUTHGATE**
Despite the band of critics who see him as too conservative, the long-serving Three Lions boss undoubtedly has restored much lustre to the national team. Doors in the Premier League are sure to be open to him.

Domenico **TEDESCO**
Although he is contractually committed to the Belgium national team, voices in Germany and Italy remain insistent that the ex-Schalke, Spartak Moscow and RB Leipzig coach could soon be operating in the Bundesliga or Serie A.

Julian **NAGELSMANN**
The ex-Hoffenheim, RB Leipzig and Bayern boss is expected to return to the club scene after taking charge of Germany at Euro 2024. Dortmund is a possible landing spot, but the 36-year-old might feel ready to test himself in the English top flight.

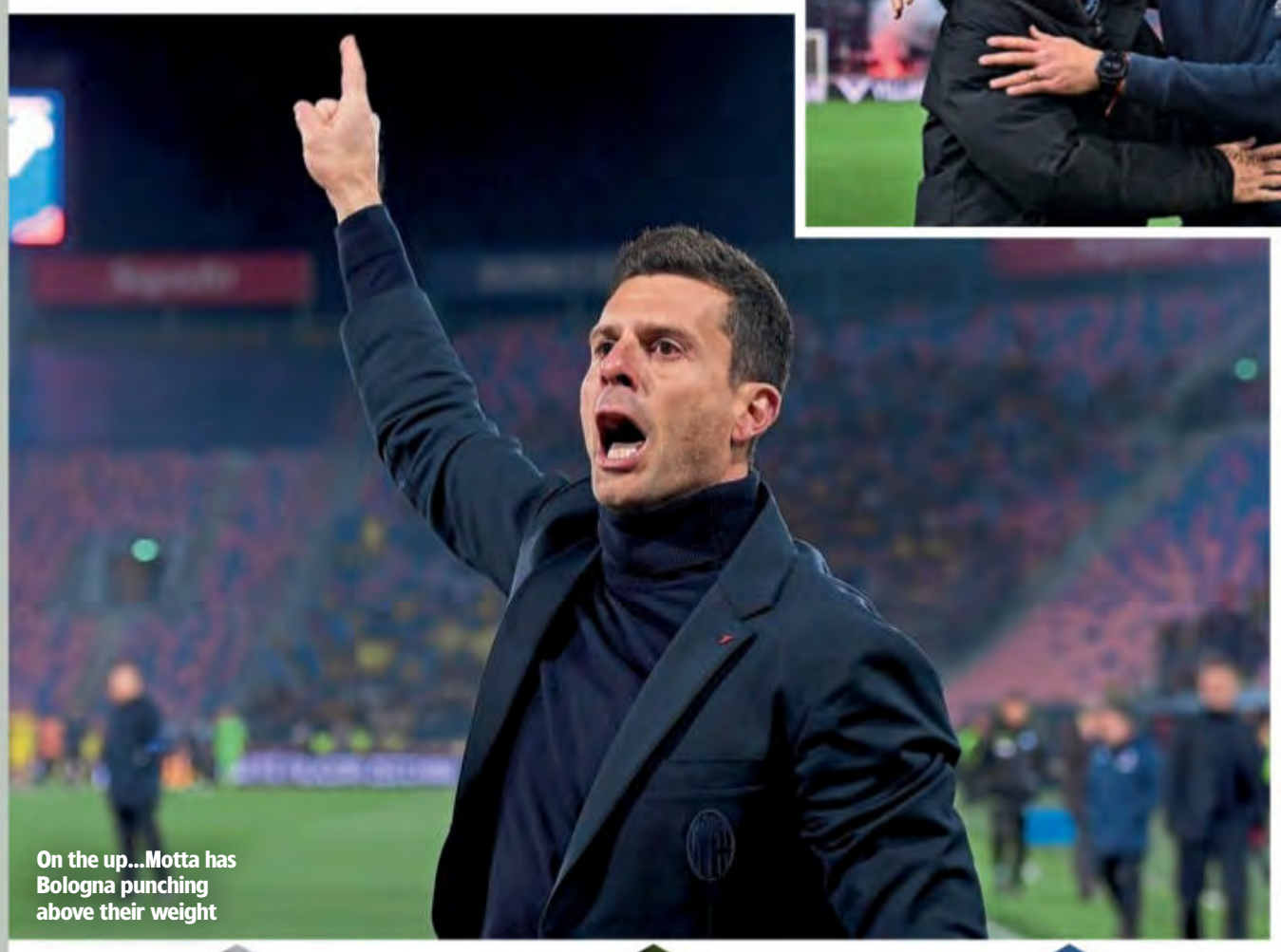
Thiago **MOTTA**

'One of the best readers of the game on the continent'

No one should be surprised to see the former Italy midfielder making such an excellent fist of leading Bologna in Serie A, turning the *Rossoblu* into shock candidates for Champions League qualification this campaign. A first-class defensive midfielder in his playing-day pomp with Barcelona, Atletico Madrid, Genoa, Internazionale and Paris Saint-Germain, he was one of the best readers of the game on the continent and over the course of those two decades worked with a string of world-beating coaches, including Jose Mourinho, Rafa Benitez and Carlo Ancelotti. In the midst of all those great managers, he was just bound to acquire a wealth of invaluable know-how, the sort of tips, tricks and insight that is serving him so well today.

A recipient of countless winners' medals during his playing career – in the Champions League, various domestic championships and the Club World Cup – Motta claims he was especially influenced by his old Genoa boss Gian Piero Gasperini, the man many regard as one of the most revolutionary Italian football thinkers of recent times, someone who during his spells in charge at Genoa and Atalanta made the game fun again with his high defensive line, aggressive press, supersonic wing-backs, head-spinning overloads and fast-paced attacks.

Influential... Motta embraces his former mentor Gian Piero Gasperini



On the up...Motta has Bologna punching above their weight

"If I'm coaching now, it's thanks to him," says Motta. "I had so many marvellous experiences with him and learnt so much from his training sessions, the way he worked. Every day he used to transmit such strength to the team. His passion is an example to us all."

Motta, who prior to his appointment at Bologna in September 2022 coached the PSG Under-19s and Genoa and Spezia in Serie A, has not swallowed the entirety of the Gasperini instruction manual. In contrast to his old mentor, Motta prefers a four-man defence to a back three, and his Bologna certainly play with more lucidity, patience and control than a Gasperini side. The pair do have much in common, though, especially in the aggressive high press, the impudence in attacking mode and building out from the back.

Bologna under Motta is something of a strange beast, a team of typical Italian tactical discipline and rigour, but also with a strong strain of self-expression and liberty, with players deserting their nominal positions to create confusion. "The boys know what they have to do but are also free to add, to move and to indulge their sensations," declares Motta. "At times, they even surprise me."

Roger **SCHMIDT**
A *Gegenpressing* disciple, Schmidt thrilled Benfica fans en route to last season's league title and the Champions League quarter-finals, but this season has come under increasing criticism. Another project may tempt him.

Sebastian **HOENESS**
The architect of Stuttgart's surprise push for Champions League qualification this season is rumoured to be a candidate to replace Thomas Tuchel at Bayern, where he used to coach the youth and Under-23 sides.

Sergio **CONCEICAO**
After a fantastic seven-year spell at Porto, where Conceicao has scooped ten domestic trophies, "Mr Intensity" is reportedly on his farewell tour at the Dragons. Napoli and Barcelona are thought to be monitoring his situation.

Arne **SLOT**

'Innovative with a scintillating brand of attacking football'

Eredivisie winner... Arne Slot

When it comes to career choices, the much-coveted Feyenoord head coach marches to the beat of his own drum, going his own way and relying on his instincts to guide him. Midway through the 2020-21 campaign, AZ Alkmaar fired him, claiming Slot had lost focus amid speculation linking him with the Feyenoord job, where he would indeed end up for the start of the 2021-22 season. Then, last summer, he surprisingly rejected job offers from Premier League heavyweights Tottenham and Chelsea. Normally overseas managers jump at the chance of earning their corn in the English top fight, but 45-year-old Slot thought it wiser to remain with Feyenoord, whom he had just steered to their first Eredivisie title since 2017.

It's also fair to say that negotiations between Tottenham and Feyenoord were rather complicated. Under contract with the Rotterdammers until 2025 (and since extended to 2026), Slot's deal did not contain a buy-out clause for the summer of 2023 and, with both parties playing hardball, no compensation package could be agreed.

If he is to move on, it surely will be in the next few months. He has probably achieved all he can at De Kuip, leading the boys in the famous red-and-white halved shirts to the runners-up spot in the 2021-22 Europa Conference League and the Dutch championship 12 months later, only the club's second league title this century. In this season's Eredivisie race, his team will likely end up in second behind PSV.

Voted the Netherlands Coach of the Season in 2021-22 and 2022-23, he worked wonders in all areas at both AZ and Feyenoord. In the 2019-20 Eredivisie campaign, his outstanding AZ side spent all season battling at the top of the table with Ajax until COVID caused the campaign to be abandoned, and it was the same story of wall-to-wall improvement when he took over at Feyenoord in the summer of 2021. The previous season, Feyenoord had cut a sorry figure indeed, finishing a poor fifth, a whopping 29 points adrift of league champions Ajax. He soon would have the Rotterdammers firing again and last term they took the Netherlands by storm, only losing twice in 34 fixtures.

He is innovative, has a knack of helping players tap potential they were unaware of and, last but not least, favours a scintillating brand of attacking football. He describes the Premier League as "the best in the world", a sure sign of where his ambitions lie.

REST OF THE WORLD

Matthias **JAISSLE**
Currently in charge of Saudi outfit Al Ahli, the former coach of Red Bull Salzburg – whom he led to two Austrian league titles and the last 16 of the Champions League in 2021-22 – wouldn't say no to a return to the European mainstream.

Wilfried **NANCY**
Unknown in his French homeland, the Normandy-born coach won the 2023 MLS Cup with a Columbus Crew side playing a highly-attractive style. After 18 years in North America, a post in Europe awaits Thierry Henry's former assistant at FC Montreal.

Kjetil **KNUTSEN**
Linked with Swansea City before Christmas, the visionary Bodo/Glimt boss is one of the most accomplished football thinkers in Scandinavia and too good for the English second tier. The 55-year-old would not be out of place in the Champions League.

Fernando **DINIZ**
Never mind his recent ill-fated stint as the interim manager of Brazil, the coach of South American champions Fluminense, an apostle of a whirlwind style of free-flowing football, could prove a big hit in Portugal or Spain.

THE CENTURION

Internazionale's captain and talisman is enjoying the best season of his career

Words: Nick Bidwell

Early November 2015: an 18-year-old frontrunner by the name of Lautaro Martinez makes his senior bow for Racing Club in an Argentine league victory at home to Crucero del Norte, coming on as an 80th-minute substitute for veteran striker Diego Milito. A night to remember for the debutant and also one of unmistakeable symbolism, with club legend Milito passing the baton to a youngster destined for his own slice of greatness: a World Cup winners' medal with Argentina in 2022 and iconic status as one of Internazionale's most accomplished goalscorers of all time.

Martinez, aka *El Toro* (The Bull), did not merely follow in Milito's footsteps. For three years, he was splendidly mentored by the older man, first as a team-mate then as director of sport at the club, the role he assumed on hanging up his boots in May 2016.

It's highly unlikely that Martinez, who moved to Inter for a reported €22.7 million in the summer of 2018, would have pledged himself to the *Nerazzurri* without Milito's input. A bona fide Inter legend after wearing the Black-and-Blue stripes with distinction for five seasons and contributing 30 goals to the club's historic treble in 2009-10, Milito was only too pleased to sell his beloved former club to the next-generation starlet – even to the point of actively tilting negotiations in Inter's favour.

"When I became the director of football at Racing, talks with Atletico Madrid were already underway," revealed Milito in *La Gazzetta dello Sport*. "The gap between the offer and our valuation was only two or three million. Nothing more. I called Javier Zanetti [Inter's Argentine vice-president] because I knew that Inter were interested in him too. So I made my move. Piero Ausilio [then Inter's director of football] came here and closed the deal. I'm not sure it was me who convinced him [Lautaro] to opt for a certain direction, but I'm happy that it turned out as it did. Inter deserve most of the praise for seizing the moment, for acting quickly to make an excellent signing."

Asked during his first Inter press conference if he saw himself as Milito's heir, Martinez replied that the former had "achieved amazing things at Inter" and that he hoped to do the same. The tale of the tape almost six years later? Mission accomplished – and then some. With 128 goals for Inter in 275 competitive games by the end of March, Martinez has proved even more prolific than Milito and in terms of Serie A goals has vastly outscored his old counsellor; Martinez's three-figure haul dwarfing Milito's 62.

This season, his first as Inter skipper, he has set about dominating the Italian scene. Scoring 23 goals in his first 26 Serie A matches speaks for itself, and not only has Lautaro every chance of claiming the *Capocannoniere*

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Landmark strike...Martinez scores his 100th Serie A goal

award for 2023-24, he also is in contention for the European Golden Shoe, battling to outdo Harry Kane, Kylian Mbappe and Erling Haaland.

In February of this year, during a 4-0 away win at Lecce, he had the honour of netting his 100th goal in Serie A, thus joining a select band of 92 gunslingers. He is now only the third foreigner at Inter to achieve the feat (after the Franco-Hungarian Istvan Nyers and his fellow Argentine Mauro Icardi). Icardi and Martinez were team-mates in the latter's first season at Inter, the often wayward and mercurial Icardi standing in marked contrast to the new boy's dedication and reliability.

Martinez, who currently sits eighth in the all-time list of Inter marksmen, has racked up at least 20 Serie A goals in each of the past three campaigns and is the perfect example of the consummate all-round finisher, capable of putting the ball in the net every which way. A quick examination of the source of his first 100 Serie A goals tells its own story: 60 with his favoured right foot, 22 with the left and 18 headers.

One only has to look at some of the thrilling goals he has scored with his supposed weaker foot. Take the magnificent strike in Inter's 4-0 win over Atalanta last February, picking up the ball on the edge of the box, swivelling away from his marker and curling home a stunner via his left boot. Or his smart finish in the 1-0 win over crosstown rivals Milan in the second leg of last season's Champions League semi-final, the goal that clinched the *Nerazzurri's* first final appearance in 13 years. Or the crisply-struck late, late supersub winner he pulled out of the hat in a 1-0 home victory over Atalanta in his first season at Inter.

Whatever the circumstances, whatever his status on the day, he will supply the end product. Not only a threat as a starter but also as an impact substitute: last season, for example, he was the most effective substitute in Serie A with six goals and, back in September, he was once again the devastating part-timer, coming off the bench to score all four of his team's goals in a 4-0 victory at Salernitana, the first substitute ever to do so in the Italian top flight.

Inter supporters certainly appreciate his innate ability for decisive goals, not least the brace which sealed victory over Fiorentina in the Coppa Italia final last term and the thunderbolt he unleashed from the edge of the box in a 1-0 Champions League win at Liverpool in March 2022.

Improving year on year, Lautaro is, however, much more than a penalty-box opportunist. With his energy, physicality, intelligent decoy runs, sound hold-up play and ability to drop deep and slickly combine with attacking midfielders, he is influential in so many ways. He very much embodies the Hispanic phrase *"garra"*, meaning tenacity, bravery and will-to-win. As all at Inter are well aware, no cause is ever lost in his world.

During a 4-0 away win at Lecce, he had the honour of netting his 100th goal in Serie A, thus joining a select band of 92 gunslingers

He was just born to put the ball in the net. At his first club Liniers, located in his hometown of Bahia Blanca, a town in Buenos Aires province, he regularly was on the scoresheet for their junior team and also provided much of the firepower when spearheading the attack of the regional Under-17 XI (La Liga del Sur), playing a key role in their march to the ▶

Two-footed...Martinez nets against Milan with his weaker left foot

Trademark celebration ...Lautaro after scoring on his full Serie A home debut in September 2018

final of the national cup in 2013, where they lost on penalties to Rosario.

Hugo Renones, his coach for the Liga del Sur (Southern League) and Bahia Blanca representative sides, insists that Martinez always stood out from the crowd. "I had to select him for the Bahia Blanca Under-17s. On seeing him for the first time, I straightaway had the feeling that he was a real ace. He was the smallest player in the team, yet I still made him my captain. He was the complete leader, both as a player and in his personality and charisma. Even then, there were articles in the press predicting a great future for him in the game.

Changing of the guard...Martinez replaces Diego Milito for his senior debut

Decisive...Lautaro scores Argentina's penalty shootout winner against the Netherlands

"He was one of those rare high-quality attackers. I remember him scoring 13 goals for us in 13 games. He had this incredible hunger. He was the sort of competitor who would score a hat-trick and take it out on himself for not playing well enough."

Not that everyone shared Renones' opinion of young Martinez. Leading Argentine clubs Boca Juniors and San Lorenzo both declined to offer him an apprenticeship and there was a desert of doubt to cross before Racing academy manager Fabio Radaelli opted to bring him on board in late 2013, beating top-flight Velez Sarsfield and River Plate to the recruitment punch.

It would not be long before he was shining for Racing with maximum wattage. At the prestigious Latinoamericano youth tournament, held in the seaside town of Mar del Plata in February 2014, he turned out to be a genuine head-turner, scoring eight goals in six games as Racing finished runners-up to Gimnasia. Fate very much was on his side on this occasion. Normally Racing only used established youth team players at the tournament and initially omitted Martinez from their squad. But with first-choice striker Brian Mansilla out injured, Lautaro was called up in extremis. An opportunity he grabbed with both hands.

One of the VIPs at that tournament was the great Mexican baseball pitcher Fernando Valenzuela, a household name in the States in the 1980s when playing for the Los Angeles Dodgers. Little did Valenzuela know that one of the kids he was watching would subsequently achieve similar sporting pre-eminence.

Now on a roll, Martinez would go on to score 70 goals for Racing's youth team and reserves and it was only a matter of time before he established himself as a first-team staple, a shoot-to-thrill figure whose highlight reel featured a brilliant hat-trick in an Argentine Superliga encounter against Huracan in February 2018 and another triple as Brazilian club Cruzeiro were beaten 4-2 in the Copa Libertadores the same month. All told, he scored 27 goals in 61 senior appearances for Racing.

> "He was the smallest player in the team, yet I still made him my captain. He was the complete leader, both as a player and in his personality and charisma"
>
> Hugo Renones, Martinez's former youth team coach

His international career thus far has been something of a mixed bag. He was in excellent form for Argentina's Under-20s at the 2017 South American Championship, ending the tournament as the joint-top scorer with five goals and earning himself lots of favourable headlines in his homeland. In a sure sign of the Argentine federation's outstanding work with youngsters, he was one of seven players from that Under-20 Class of 2017 squad to take part in the country's triumph at the Qatar World Cup five years later.

Little would go right for him at the 2017 Under-20 World Cup in South Korea. After suffering a nasty nasal injury in a warm-up game, he was only on the bench for Argentina's tournament opener against England and though brought on midway through the second half, he did not last long, sent off by video referral for an elbow on England defender Fikayo Tomori.

Making his full debut for Argentina as a substitute in a 6-1 friendly defeat to Spain in Madrid in March 2018, he was named in his nation's preliminary squad for the 2018 World Cup, but did not make the final cut. He was the first-choice centre-forward as Argentina claimed bronze at the 2019 Copa America, scored a hat-trick in a friendly win over Mexico in September 2019, contributed three goals to Argentina's 2021 Copa America triumph on enemy soil in Brazil and was Argentina's joint-top scorer – tied with Lionel Messi on seven goals – in qualification for the 2022 World Cup.

Qatar really should have been his moment. But it was not to be. While Argentina secured their third world title, Martinez ended up the fall guy, handicapped by an ankle injury and only starting the first two group games before losing his place up front to Julian Alvarez. In the knockout phase, he had to make do with substitute cameos, and while he did have the satisfaction of scoring the winning spot-kick in the penalty shootout victory over the Netherlands in the quarter-finals, the tournament as a whole was a damp squib for him, exemplified by a number of wasted chances in the thrilling back-and-forth finale against France.

"For the first few months of the 2022-23 season, I had an ankle problem and was only playing thanks to painkillers," Lautaro told Argentine broadcaster Star+. "And it was the same at the World Cup. I was in so much pain in the opening matches of the tournament against Saudi Arabia and Mexico. I simply could not do it anymore. I was not training properly and it's very hard to play in these circumstances. I closed in on myself and cried. It was really tough because I was the team's top scorer and people expected a lot of me."

Expect him to be particularly motivated when Argentina defend their World Cup crown in North America in 2026 – potentially as their talismanic captain.

World champion... Martinez lifts the trophy in Qatar

Lautaro Martinez

the numbers game

100 SERIE A GOALS

HOW?

60 right-foot goals | **22** left-foot goals

18 headed goals | **11** penalties

WHERE?

90 inside the box | **10** outside the box

31.8m
Martinez's longest-range goal, scored in a home win against Napoli in July 2020

WHEN?

16 1-15 minutes | **13** 16-30 minutes

13 31-45+ minutes | **18** 46-60 minutes

18 61-75 minutes | **22** 76-90+ minutes

WHO?

10 Salernitana | **9** Cagliari

6 Lazio | **6** Verona

6 Fiorentina

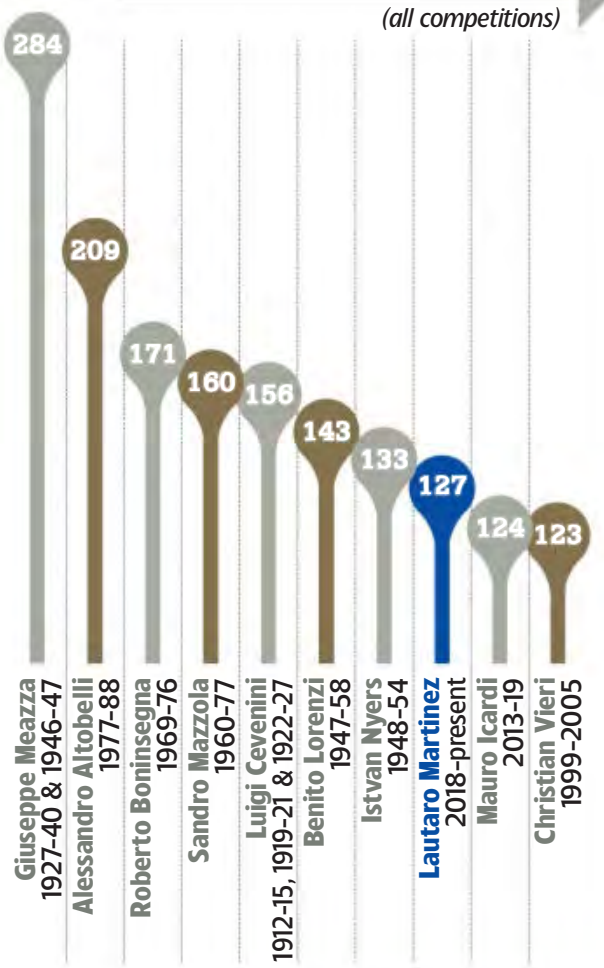
ARGENTINA

56
CAPS

22
GOALS

INTER'S RECORD SCORERS

(all competitions)

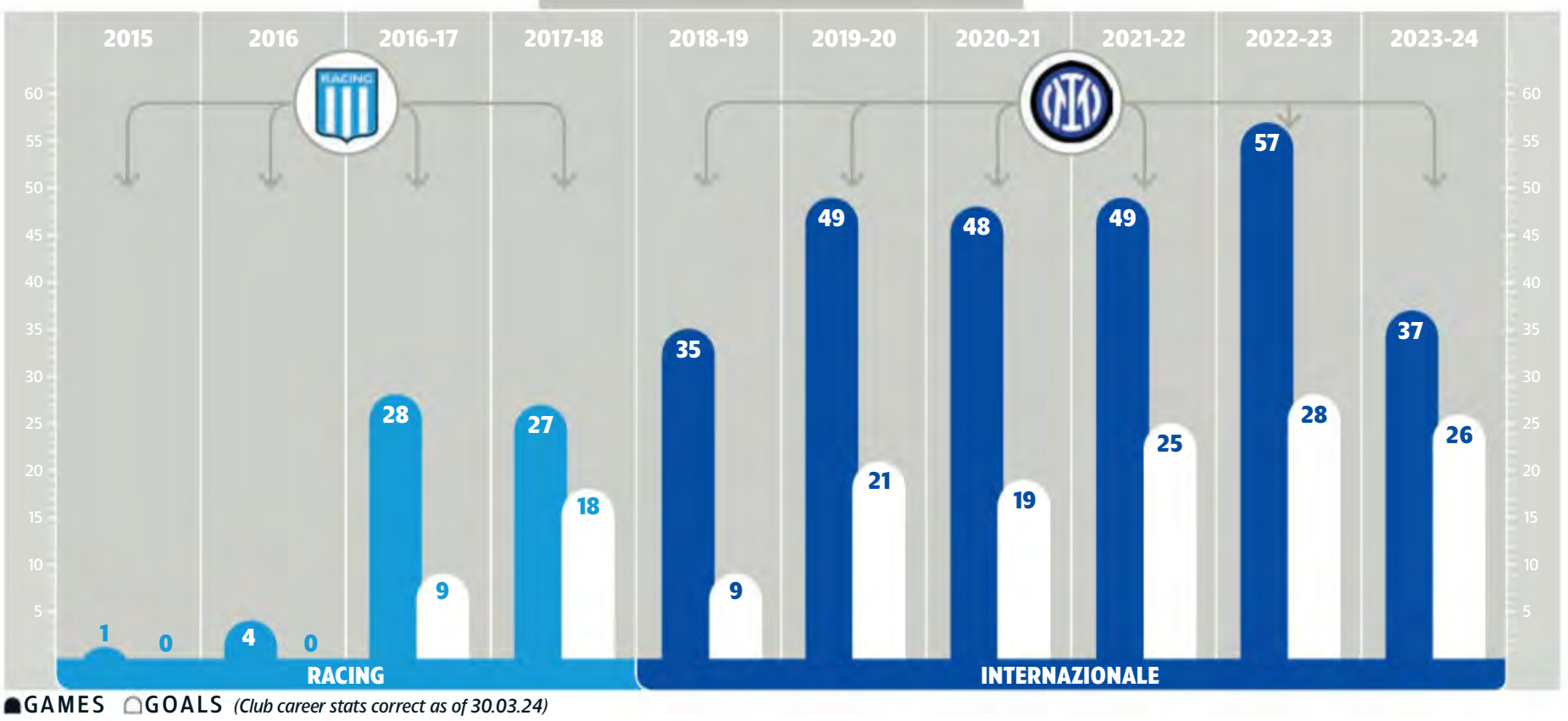


SERIE A TOP SCORERS

(Current Serie A players)

Player (club)	Goals
Ciro Immobile *(Lazio)*	200
Domenico Berardi *(Sassuolo)*	122
Paulo Dybala *(Roma)*	122
Duvan Zapata *(Torino)*	118
Andrea Belotti *(Fiorentina)*	110
Lautaro Martinez *(Inter)*	**102**

(Serie A scorers stats correct as of 29.03.24)



GAMES GOALS *(Club career stats correct as of 30.03.24)*

INTERNATIONAL ROUND-UP

World Soccer takes a closer look at some of the standout stories from March's international break…

Euro 2024 play-offs P44
San Marino P45
CONCACAF Nations League finals P46
Copa America play-offs P47
Russia P48

PLUS

FIFA Series P49
Asia's 2026 World Cup qualifiers P49
UEFA Nations League play-outs P49

POLAND, UKRAINE AND GEORGIA COMPLETE EURO 2024 LINE-UP

Heading to Germany... Poland captain Robert Lewandowski leads his country's celebrations

PATH A

Not since 1973 have Wales managed to beat Poland on the international stage – a sorry run of ten matches – and true to that half-century trend, Rob Page's plucky side just came up short in the Path A final in Cardiff, losing 5-4 on penalties to Robert Lewandowski and co. In an encounter which produced zero goals, it was wholly ironic that both teams had their shooting boots on for the tiebreaker exercise, with the Poles netting all five of their efforts and Wales converting their first four kicks.

Something had to give and sadly for the Dragons, substitute Daniel James was the one to err, left dazed and bemused after Poland keeper Wojciech Szczesny dived to his right to parry.

Wales, who crushed Finland 4-1 in the semis, can consider themselves more than a little unfortunate not to be part of the Germany 2024 gala. They arguably were brighter and sharper than the Poles and looked to have the trump card in bustling centre-forward Kieffer Moore, who posed no end of aerial problems for the visitors.

Poland were not able to muster a single shot on target in 120 minutes, though they certainly did up the tempo in the second half and came within a whisker of breaking the deadlock on 100 minutes, when midfielder Jakub Piotrowski thumped a curling long-range shot inches past the post.

All credit to Poland head coach Michal Probierz. Only in the post since September, he has instilled a mental toughness in the group. In the past, they would have folded in Cardiff.

Equaliser...Viktor Tsyhankov after scoring Ukraine's first goal v Iceland

PATH B

Through to their fourth consecutive Euros, Ukraine had to do it the hard way in Path B, tapping into the patriotic resilience which the entire country has pumping through its veins in these times of Russian hostilities. Away to Bosnia & Herzegovina in the semis, the Ukrainians were a goal down with the clock ticking, only to spectacularly turn the game on its head in a whirlwind three-minute spell thanks to goals from the Spanish-based frontline pairing of Roman Yaremchuk (Valencia) and Artem Dovbyk (Girona).

In the final, held in the Polish city of Wroclaw, Ukraine again had to come from behind against a surprisingly enterprising Iceland, who took the lead on the half-hour mark with a quite brilliant effort from Genoa frontman Albert Gudmundsson. The scorer of a hat-trick in the 4-1 semi-final win over Israel, the 26-year-old is some talent, and showed quick, dancing feet to work space for a superb long-range finish to stun the Ukrainians.

In the second half, Iceland, intelligently set up by coach Age Hareide, continued to defend with heart and soul, as well as posing a threat on the counter. But ultimately they could not resist the never-say-die spirit and relentless energy of their opponents, for whom Shakhtar Donetsk creative midfielder Heorhiy Sudakov was particularly impressive. The latter played an instrumental part in both Ukrainian goals in the second half: winger Victor Tsyhankov cutting in from the right to lash home into the bottom corner, and Chelsea's Mykhailo Mudryk firing in the winner six minutes from time.

PATH C

On a night of raw emotions and history-in-the-making in the Path C final in Tbilisi, Georgia booked their first-ever ticket for a major international tournament finals, defeating Greece 4-2 on penalties after two hours of goalless action.

Prior to the game, Greece boss Gus Poyet had stressed the need for his side to keep their emotions under control. But just when they needed strong nerves the most they succumbed to the pressure, with skipper Anastasios Bakasetas seeing his spot-kick saved by Georgian custodian Giorgi Mamardashvili and US-based former Celtic forward Giorgos Giakoumakis missing the target.

Cue scenes of utter jubilation in Tbilisi. Following 14 unsuccessful European Championship and World Cup qualifying campaigns, they have finally cracked the big time, soon to be part of the Euro 2024 festivities and to bank a €9.25 million appearance fee, the sort of money that will make a huge difference to their coffers.

Greece proved to be their own worst enemies. Despite having much more of the ball, they did little with it in an attacking sense and it says it all that it took them 100 minutes to carve out their first real goalscoring chance, Bakasetas denied at the near-post by Mamardashvili.

> Ukraine had to do it the hard way, tapping into their patriotic resilience

Georgia, who beat Luxembourg 2-0 in the Path C semis – in a dramatic and chaotic game where VAR had brought back play for a foul and a red card after Luxembourg thought they'd equalised – spent most of the game on the back foot. But what a defensive shift they put in, their resolve embodied by centre-back Guram Kashia. Expect Georgia coach Willy Sagnol, the former Bayern Munich and France right-back, to have several European clubs on his case.

Nick Bidwell

Agonising... Giakoumakis of Greece fails to score his penalty kick

WAIT GOES ON FOR SAN MARINO WIN

Hopes dashed... Andre Burley scores for St Kitts & Nevis

"Winning a match would represent a dream come true," Roberto Cevoli told *World Soccer* ahead of San Marino's clash with St Kitts & Nevis, the first of two friendlies between the two nations. The 55-year-old replaced Fabrizio Costantini as San Marino's head coach at the end of 2023, and has overseen enough improvement to allow the team to dream of ending the longest winless run in international football history, which spans two decades. "Winning just one game in our entire history speaks volumes. If we were able to repeat this feat then it would mean ultimate satisfaction for the nation as a whole."

Between their solitary victory in 2004 and these March friendlies – a run of 136 games – San Marino had conceded 552 goals and scored just 20. Their quest for an end to the streak has led to them seeking out non-UEFA opponents in recent years – in late 2022, they hosted Seychelles before travelling to St Lucia for two matches – to no avail. Yet their previous three games, which saw them get on the scoresheet in defeats to Kazakhstan (1-3), Finland (1-2) and Denmark (1-2), offered hope.

It took just 21 minutes to extend their scoring streak to four matches, as forward Filippo Berardi dispatched a penalty with venom. But leading isn't something that comes easy to the lowest-ranked side in the world, and their reluctance to press forward allowed St Kitts & Nevis to take charge. After a couple of lapses in the San Marino defence, the visitors scored twice to lead 2-1 at half-time. The hosts fared little better in the second half, eventually losing 3-1. "It's the hope that can kill you," remarked a member of the fan group *Brigata Mai 1 Gioia* (Never Any Joy Brigade).

Ahead of the rematch four days later, Matteo Vitaioli, San Marino's captain, remained positive. "Approaching games like these – where people are expecting a potential result – it is fundamental that the most experienced players keep the morale high, and focus mainly on the performance," he said.

In the second match, the forward had to wait until the 94th minute to come on for his 93rd cap, a typical situation for the 34-year-old who generally enjoys cameo roles these days. His experience was required in the dying seconds as the team held on for a clean sheet in a 0-0 draw with the Caribbean visitors – only the tenth time in San Marino's history they have avoided defeat. Despite dominating for large periods, their inability to finish chances cost them.

"We've drawn several games recently, but now we aim to raise the bar even higher and seek that win," admits Vitaioli.

The next chance for that elusive victory will come in friendlies against Slovakia and Cyprus this summer, before a new UEFA Nations League campaign begins in September against Liechtenstein – a team ranked 203rd in the FIFA rankings, just seven places above San Marino, and the nation whom San Marino claim their sole win over. Belief is high that 2024 can still be the year where they finally break their hoodoo.

"The only thing I didn't like was not scoring a goal," concluded Cevoli after the dust had settled on the second fixture – emphasising the stark increase in expectation over the past 12 months. "It's a bittersweet feeling. We had the opportunities in the first half, but we played a positive game against a physical team and we didn't give away the result. This proves to me that the future is bright."

Lewis Watson

USA MAKE IT THREE FROM THREE IN CONCACAF NATIONS LEAGUE

CONCACAF Nations League winners ...USA captain Christian Pulisic lifts the trophy

The fine line between success and failure in football was on show in Arlington, Texas for the 2023-24 CONCACAF Nations League finals where the United States continued their dominance of this tournament, lifting the trophy for a third time. But it was far from plain sailing for Gregg Berhalter and his US side. Despite maintaining their record as the only team to win this trophy since the first final in 2021, they were mere seconds away from being knocked out in the semi-finals by an understrength Jamaica side.

The Reggae Boyz were missing the likes of Michail Antonio, Leon Bailey and Demarai Gray, adding further weight to the favourites tag attached to the United States. But Jamaica took the lead via a Greg Leigh goal with just 31 seconds played, sending Berhalter's US side into crisis mode.

A dramatic late own goal from Jamaica's Cory Burke spared repercussions for what was an uninspiring showing from the US, who were fortunate to take the game to extra-time. Eventually, the quality in the US ranks showed in the additional period, with second-half substitutes Haji Wright and Gio Reyna combining twice for Coventry City striker Wright to notch a brace that secured a 3-1 victory.

> These games were played against the backdrop of the upcoming 2024 Copa America and, looking further ahead, the 2026 World Cup

Jamaica were unfortunate not to have hung on and reached the final, but they still had something to celebrate. An outstanding goal from Dexter Lembikisa was enough for them to win the third-place play-off against a disappointing Panama, who lost 3-0 to Mexico in the other semi.

These days, the United States often appear more comfortable in games against Mexico than they do against some of the other teams from the region, and that was the case again as the final pit the two regional heavyweights against each other.

Berhalter was able to take the positives from extra-time against Jamaica into the final against Mexico. Reyna and Wright both came into the starting line-up, as did defenders Tim Ream and Sergino Dest and midfielder Tyler Adams – the latter having come on against Jamaica. Adams' minutes are still being limited as he returns to fitness following a hamstring injury, and the Bournemouth midfielder was withdrawn at half-time, but he still had enough time to give the US the lead with a thunderous strike from distance.

It was a lead they would not relinquish. With the new faces involved from the start, the US looked like an altogether more convincing outfit than they had against Jamaica, and Reyna's quality was once again on show as he added a brilliant second goal following great play from Christian Pulisic on the wing.

It was a game marred by homophobic chanting from a considerable contingent of Mexico supporters, which led to the game being temporarily halted twice in the final minutes following numerous warnings and stadium announcements. United States players were also pelted with drinks and other objects as they

Semi-final supersub...United States striker Haji Wright scores past Jamaica goalkeeper Andre Blake in extra-time

celebrated Reyna's second-half goal in one corner of the pitch. It is an ongoing problem in the region and CONCACAF may have to alter its course of action beyond merely halting games if the issues are to be properly tackled.

The US are now unbeaten in seven games against Mexico, having won five and drawn two, making it their most dominant spell in the history of this continental rivalry. This in turn has led to further questions being asked of Mexico coach Jaime Lozano.

These games were played against the backdrop of the upcoming 2024 Copa America and, looking further ahead, the 2026 World Cup, both of which will be played on North American soil. It means coaches like Berhalter and Lozano are being judged not only on current results but also on how performances might translate to games against stronger opponents from South America this summer and from elsewhere around the world in 2026.

Just as Lozano winning the 2023 Gold Cup with Mexico didn't end doubts about whether he is the right coach to lead *El Tri* in upcoming tournaments, the same will likely be true of Berhalter's Nations League triumph.

But for now, the US coaching staff, players and fans get to celebrate another deserved title and revel in their current dominance of the Mexico-US rivalry.

James Nalton

CANADA AND COSTA RICA JOIN COPA PARTY IN THE USA

Party time...Costa Rica winger Alvaro Zamora celebrates his country scoring against Honduras

While the four CONCACAF teams already qualified for the 2024 Copa America competed in the Nations League finals, there were a couple of loose ends to tie up as two more places at this summer's Copa in the United States were up for grabs.

As Mexico, Jamaica, Panama and the United States themselves had already qualified thanks to their performances in the Nations League, the remaining CONCACAF guest spots at the CONMEBOL tournament were decided by a pair of qualifiers involving the four losing teams from the Nations League quarter-finals.

Canada have struggled to replicate the form that saw them top the table in CONCACAF qualifying for the 2022 World Cup, but they were able to put a disappointing spell behind them with a win against Trinidad & Tobago in the first of these one-match play-offs.

It would have been unthinkable for Canada not to join fellow 2026 World Cup hosts Mexico and the United States in this year's Copa America, which is serving as something of a high-profile curtain-raiser to the main event in 2026. Interim Canada coach Mauro Biello, who was appointed after John Herdman left to join Major League Soccer side Toronto FC last year, remained in charge for the meeting with Trinidad & Tobago.

Canada dominated the game, but the 0-0 half-time scoreline kept the fans on edge. That continued until the 60-minute mark, when the country's all-time top scorer, Cyle Larin, added another goal to his tally, taking him up to 29 in total. Winger Jacob Shaffelburg came off the bench to add a second in added time to make sure of the victory, bringing a combination of relief and optimism.

After extending his deal, Canada Soccer said they are still conducting a "global search" for a permanent coach, but Biello is a contender. Despite recent struggles, the victory and the performance could only improve his chances.

The game between the teams ranked fifth and seventh in CONCACAF, Costa Rica and Honduras, was more difficult to call. Honduras had taken Mexico all the way to a penalty shootout in their Nations League quarter-final, and took the lead in this game, but ultimately Costa Rica demonstrated the kind of quality that sees them regularly ranked among the top five teams in the region.

It took just ten minutes for winger Michaell Chirinos to give *Los Catrachos* the lead, but Costa Rica replied almost immediately via Orlando Galo before second-half strikes from Warren Madrigal and Jefferson Brenes secured the win and, with it, Copa America qualification.

Costa Rica's reward will be to go into a tough group containing Brazil, Paraguay and Colombia. Meanwhile, Canada will play in the tournament opener against defending champions Argentina on June 20 in Atlanta, Georgia, before facing Peru and Chile in Group A.

The two nations, who would have expected to be among the six Copa America guest teams from CONCACAF, made hard work of their qualification but finally made it through with the last chance.

National teams from across the Americas will now prepare for this summer's showcase, with the CONCACAF sides aiming to cause some upsets and crash the CONMEBOL party, all the while with one eye on 2026.

James Nalton

RUSSIA HOST FIRST UEFA OPPONENT SINCE UKRAINE INVASION

As Europe focused its attention on the crunch Euro 2024 play-offs over the March international break, Serbia began preparations for the finals by travelling to Moscow, becoming the first UEFA member to play Russia in over two years.

The friendly, on March 21 at Dynamo Moscow's VTB Arena, is unpalatable for much of Europe while war in Ukraine rages on, including for Russians residing in Serbia's capital, Belgrade. "I don't plan to watch it because it lacks sporting interest," says Roman, one of the estimated 300,000 Russians who have moved to Serbia since 2022. On matchday, it is clear his fellow emigrants – many of whom have a pro-Western outlook – have not turned out to support their homeland either. "The match doesn't make much sense because it's unclear when Russia will participate in international competitions," adds Roman.

Many of the Belgrade locals, though, are more sympathetic. For Milutin, a Serbian 20-something watching the match, Russia should be readmitted to UEFA immediately. "They are football players, they don't have anything to do with the political situation, so Russia should be playing like every other country," he says, echoing the sentiments of many Serbians, who often feel more positively towards Russia than the Russians in Belgrade do. "This match is great because it shows politics should not be involved in sport," adds Milutin. "Every match should be enjoyed – that's what sport is all about."

Over in Moscow ahead of kick-off, the optics looked good for the hosts – a large crowd welcoming a strong side is already a win for Russia. "Tonight, we play with brothers!" declared the national team's social media channels, echoing a common theme in the countries' relationship. Serbia's cultural and political links to Russia are stronger than those of any other European nation, and the connection extends to football. Two days after the international match, Red Star Belgrade and Zenit Saint Petersburg also met for a friendly, this time in Belgrade. The home end was filled with Russian flags, and both sets of players posed together for a photo carrying a banner with the Russian word for "Together."

That show of solidarity was in part a response to the terrorist attack that

Brotherhood... Russia midfielder Ivan Oblyakov and Mijat Gacinovic of Serbia vie for the ball

"Together"...Red Star Belgrade and Zenit Saint Petersburg players pose for a photo before their friendly at the Rajko Mitic Stadium

took place in Moscow a day before. Still, this is not the first time that the two nations have defied the wider international community in support of each other. Back in 1995, the roles were reversed when Russia – with a team featuring current coach Valeri Karpin – became the first UEFA side to visit Belgrade after the Bosnian War led to Yugoslavia being banned on the eve of Euro '92.

For Serbia though, this game was more than a family reunion. In the final international window before Dragan Stojkovic names his squad for their first-ever European Championship as an independent nation, the referee's decision to send off their full-back Milan Gajic after just 21 minutes for a pull on Daniil Khlusevich inside the area put a dent in their preparations. Shortly after Anton Miranchuk converted the penalty, Russia doubled their lead; Serbia failed to clear a free-kick, allowing Maksim Osipenko to prod the ball past Chelsea goalkeeper Djordje Petrovic.

Serbia turned to their bench for the second half, with Aleksandar Mitrovic, Sergej Milinkovic-Savic and Filip Kostic coming on, but to little effect. Ten minutes after the restart, Aleksey Miranchuk made it three, before Ivan Sergeev completed a comfortable 4-0 win in stoppage-time.

The result means that since receiving their FIFA and UEFA bans, Russia have played 12 games and lost only once. They have visited Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Qatar, Uzbekistan, Iran and Turkey to play Kenya. Last year, Iraq became the first team to travel to Russia since 2021, followed by Cameroon and Cuba. Paraguay would have been the latest team to visit Moscow, but their game was cancelled in the wake of the attack on the city.

> "Tonight, we play with brothers!"
> The Russian national team's social media

It is an impressive run, but the question is: where do Russia go next? The Russian Football Union toyed with joining the Asian Football Confederation, and came close to taking part in the Central Asian FA Nations Cup last summer, before ultimately declining. UEFA briefly opened the door to re-entry by lifting the ban on the Under-17 team, but reversed that decision under pressure from a selection of other members.

Yugoslavia were not readmitted until December 1995, when the Dayton Agreement ended the Bosnian War, and it seems a similar resolution will be required here. "The only way back is, at the very least, stopping the war in Ukraine," concludes Roman.

Anthony Tomas

ROUND-UP

FIFA Series...players of Egypt and Croatia line-up ahead of their final in Cairo

FIFA SERIES PILOT

March's international window also saw the pilot edition of the FIFA Series, the initiative designed to increase the number of games between nations from different confederations. In total, 24 teams took part in six series across five nations – Algeria, Azerbaijan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Sri Lanka.

The Egypt edition, which included Croatia, New Zealand and Tunisia as well as the hosts, bucked the trend of the others by being staged as a knockout competition. Whether it was due to the format or the calibre of nations involved, the games in Cairo drew the biggest crowds of any of the Series, with the hosts attracting over 30,000 spectators to their first game and more than 85,000 for the final, while the other fixtures saw between 4,000 and 5,000. Those fans were, though, largely disappointed: Croatia beat the hosts 4-2 in the final, the only game to feature any open-play goals.

The Algerian Series was more entertaining, with the hosts beating Bolivia 3-2 and drawing 3-3 with South Africa in their first games under new coach Vladimir Petkovic. In the same group, Andorra will take encouragement from a 1-1 draw with *Bafana Bafana* and a narrow 1-0 defeat to Bolivia.

Crowds were sparse in Baku for the Azerbaijan Series, even in matches involving the hosts, with Tanzania's games with Bulgaria and Mongolia attended by little over 100 fans.

Likewise, the two Series played in Saudi Arabia – neither of which involved the host nation due to 2026 World Cup qualifying – took place in mostly empty stadiums. Of the eight teams to travel to the Middle East, Guinea had the best record, swatting aside Vanuatu 6-0 and Bermuda 5-1.

The Central African Republic might also have wished for sterner tests after travelling to Sri Lanka and winning 6-0 against Bhutan and 4-0 against Papua New Guinea.

ASIAN WORLD CUP QUALIFYING

Palestine were the biggest winners from March's Asian World Cup qualifiers after beating Bangladesh twice. The first match, staged in Kuwait, was a 5-0 thrashing, before a dramatic victory in Dhaka five days later, as the visitors had a man sent off in the 92nd minute then scored the winner in the 94th.

In Group B, Japan narrowly beat North Korea at home before the return game in Pyongyang was cancelled by the hosts. With no alternative venue or date available, the likely outcome is that Samurai Blue will be awarded a 3-0 win, thereby securing their progress.

Elsewhere, manager-less South Korea remained top of Group C despite being held to a 1-1 draw with Thailand in Seoul, while Asian Cup finalists Jordan got back into contention in Group G by winning twice against Pakistan with an aggregate score of 10-0.

UEFA NATIONS LEAGUE RELEGATION PLAY-OUT

Gibraltar will play in League D of the 2024-25 UEFA Nations League when it kicks off in September after losing their relegation play-out to Lithuania.

Lithuania won the first leg, which took place in the Algarve, Portugal, with a solitary goal from Armandas Kucys, though it was a far from convincing result given that Gibraltar had their goalkeeper, Dayle Coleing, sent off after 26 minutes and went into the match on a ten-game losing streak.

Still, Lithuania weren't punished for their wastefulness. In the second leg, a 50th-minute goal from Fedor Cernych secured a 2-0 aggregate win.

The result means that Lithuania will face Romania, Kosovo and Cyprus in their 2024-25 Nations League group in League C, while Gibraltar can, at least, look forward to the prospect of ending their losing streak in a League D group containing San Marino and Liechtenstein.

COLE AS ICE

The rise of Chelsea's ice-cold attacking superstar

Words: Ryan Baldi

It's becoming a common sight in the Premier League: Cole Palmer celebrating yet another goal for Chelsea by rubbing his upper arms, as if caught coatless in a sudden cold snap. Yet the young forward is not uncomfortable; rather, he wants the world to know he has ice in his veins. Indeed, given how frequently he is scoring and how freely he has breezed through opposition backlines since his £40 million summer move from Manchester City, the mere appearance of his name on matchday teamsheets is enough to send a chill down the spine of any defender.

Leaving his hometown club could not have been an easy decision for the 21-year-old from Wythenshawe, especially as it meant swapping the most dominant side in Europe for a team in the midst of a rebuild. But at Stamford Bridge, Palmer has found a broader platform upon which to showcase his skills – by March, he had already more than tripled his total career Premier League minutes and scored twice as many goals in all competitions as he ever did for City.

And as the spotlight has trained more intently on him, Palmer's personality has come to the fore. The languid swagger with which he plays and the insouciant I'm-too-cold celebration evince a calm and deeply entrenched self-confidence; a self-belief calcified by a life of striving – and succeeding – to prove people wrong.

"I think his self-belief has grown," says Terry John, the former head of youth recruitment at City. "He was small and slight when he was young. These players, they've all got that confidence and belief, and it was always there for Cole, but I think it grows as their body grows and as they mature."

It's hard to believe now, as Palmer stands a sturdy 6ft 2ins, but his first battle against how he was perceived by others was related to his size.

Cole as ice... Palmer's trademark goal celebration

He joined City at eight years old and was one of the smallest players throughout the club's younger age groups. Team-mates and opponents were taller, faster and stronger, so Palmer had to stand out in other ways.

"At nine, ten, 11, he was tiny," says Scott Sellars, who was City's academy manager in Palmer's early years with the club. "But he could always – like he does now – drop a shoulder very quickly and go past people.

"He had the technical ability and the decision-making, he just had no physicality. I remember going to a tournament in Germany when he was about ten years old. He really stood out. He would float past three, four, five players at times.

"He always had an inner confidence. He was quiet, but he had a big belief. You could see it in his ability. That was a strength of his. Things didn't seem to worry him too much. He'd get the ball and, if he didn't beat somebody, it was like, 'It's OK, I'll beat you next time.' He was very determined. He was a kid who wanted to prove people wrong all the time."

City would compile highlight videos of their academy teams' best performances to show to players within the youngest age groups as inspiration and guidance. These clips exemplified the skill, technique and teamwork the club wanted to foster. Footage of Palmer gliding over the pitches at that youth tournament in Germany featured heavily.

It was a star turn in another tournament, at Under-15 level, that earned Palmer his first England youth call-up. The event, staged at Warwick University, brought together teams from the best academies in England as well as continental invitees such as Porto and Ajax. Palmer, drowned beneath

PALMER
20

his ill-fitting sky-blue City shirt, was named Player of the Tournament.

"That was the first time I'd seen him," says Cambridge United assistant manager Kevin Betsy, who was in charge of the England Under-15s at the time. "I was there to scout the next crop of Under-15 players. Cole was one who stood out on that day.

"Cole was very diminutive, skinny. I remember his shirt was quite a bit baggier than some of the other boys. It was a case of his technical and tactical quality really standing out when we watched the games. He had a real good feel for the ball. His one-v-one dribbling ability and close control was evident, even at that age. In tight spaces, he was excellent. He had vision and awareness. He was able to impact the game."

The following August, Palmer was part of a large group invited to an England camp at Loughborough University. That group was then reduced, with the best prospects called back for another get-together in October, before a final selection was made for a series of friendlies in December and February. Palmer made it all the way through and never looked back.

"Cole's first game was against Turkey at St George's Park. He did very well," Betsy remembers. "Then we selected him to come with us to Italy for a tournament where we played Italy, Portugal and the USA. We got to the final. Then he was selected pretty much every age group going forward. There'd always be one moment of quality from Cole – whether it be a first touch, a dribble, a through ball, a goal – all the way through the pathwa ."

At the same time, Palmer continued to develop within Manchester City's academy. While his technical skills and tactical understanding improved, he also demonstrated a deep desire to play football – no matter the situation. He played as a winger on either side, a No.10 and even, at times, as a left wing-back.

"He could play anywhere," Sellars says. "I liked him centrally because he'd beat people and then get in on goal. He just wanted to get on the ball and show how good he was."

Still, around the age of 16, just as Palmer was beginning to sprout a physique to match his huge talent, there was not unanimous agreement within City about exactly how good he was. For a time, his rapid physical growth appeared to

Rising star... Palmer in action for Manchester City in the 2019 FA Youth Cup final

Ice-cool...Palmer scores a stoppage-time penalty in Chelsea's 4-4 draw with Manchester City

hamper his performances and there were some who had doubts. Others – including academy director Jason Wilcox – remained staunch believers in Palmer's vast potential.

"He had some challenges sometimes at club level because he was going through growth and he wasn't able to showcase his talents as consistently as some other players," Betsy says. "When you're at a club like Manchester City, they'll be signing some of the best young talent in world football. For a young player that's developing, it can be challenging. He might not have always played every week and there'd be other talented players in his position. But it's great to see where he is now and how he's come through those challenging moments."

Once he'd settled into his frame, Palmer soon re-established himself as one of the jewels of City's academy. There was no greater demonstration of his drive to overcome setbacks than when he starred in City's FA Youth Cup victory in 2020.

In the previous year's edition of the country's oldest and most prestigious youth competition, City had hosted Liverpool in the final at their purpose-built academy stadium. A 16-year-old Palmer had come on as a substitute in extra-time, with the score level at 1-1. The match went to a shootout and Palmer was the only player on either team to miss his penalty.

Such disappointment might have stuck a crushing blow to others' confidence, but Palmer took it in stride. The following season, he hit 15 goals as City won the Under-18 Premier League trophy before leading them to redemption in the FA Youth Cup, scoring against Chelsea in the final.

In the two years following that penalty miss against Liverpool, Palmer scored 33 goals and assisted 16 in 47 games at academy level, and was named City's Under-18s Player of the Year for 2020.

A first-team debut arrived that year, too, with Pep Guardiola calling up the youngster for a League Cup fixture against Burnley. His first goal at senior level came a year later, in a 6-1 win over Wycombe Wanderers at the Etihad.

Even after his first-team breakthrough, Palmer's insatiable appetite for football saw him playing anywhere he could, as often as he could.

> "He'd played 15 minutes for the first team, then raced across the road and played for the Under-23s….he loves football"
>
> **Former England Under-15 coach Kevin Betsy**

"There was a really special moment when I was working for Arsenal's Under-23s as the head coach," Betsy says. "We were playing Manchester City. We were second in the league at the time and they were top. Cole had come off the bench for the first team in an early kick-off at the Etihad, so we were looking at the squad and thinking he wouldn't be in it.

"But Cole was starting. So basically, he'd played 15 minutes for the first team, then raced across the road and played for the Under-23s. That gives you an indication of the character of the boy. He loves football. His sole determination was to improve and develop and grow.

"A lot of players who'd played for the first team that year, let alone that day, would say: 'I don't need to go and play for the Under-23s now, I'm past that.' But he was still so humble and wanted to improve that he wanted to play in the next available game that was three or four hours later."

On September 1 2023, transfer deadline day, eyebrows were raised and doubts were cast when Palmer joined Chelsea. Some questioned why the Blues had agreed to pay such a high fee for a player who'd started just three Premier League games in his young career. Others pointed out that Palmer would be better served by continuing his progress within the harmony of the Etihad rather than the chaos of Stamford Bridge, particularly having started and scored in City's UEFA Super Cup victory over Sevilla following a cameo – and another goal – against Arsenal in the Community Shield. After the departure of Riyad Mahrez, a space in Guardiola's first team had opened up.

Yet the ever-confident Palmer was done with waiting, and quickly set about silencing his doubters. He scored his first goal for the Blues in early October. By the end of the following month, he'd scored a late equaliser in a pulsating 4-4 draw with his former club and earned his first England cap.

"That inner drive, he's definitely got that," says John. "He can change a game. And he's proved that at Chelsea. He didn't have to prove anything to anyone else, but I think he wanted to prove it to himself."

"I think a lot of people thought that, because of all the wingers Chelsea had bought, he was going to be in the same situation he was in at City," Sellars adds. "But again he's proved people wrong and shown that he's the main one."

In front of goal, he is cold-blooded. Off the pitch, he is as cool as they come. But Palmer has gotten to where he is – a Premier League star for Chelsea and a foundational part of England's future – thanks to a fiery determination that only burns hotter the more anyone dares to doubt him.

International debut ...Palmer came on as a sub in England's Euro 2024 qualifier against Malta in November

RE-LIVING THE REPLAY

Twenty-five years on from Manchester United and Arsenal's famous FA Cup semi-final tie, **Ryan Baldi** speaks to the players that made it one of the defining moments of the era

On April 15, 1999, Alex Ferguson enjoyed lunch at Newmarket Racecourse. It was a brief respite from an increasingly hectic schedule for the Manchester United manager as his side chased down an unprecedented treble of Premier League, FA Cup and Champions League trophies. Taking advantage of a narrow gap in his packed diary, he'd taken a 6.50am flight from Manchester to Stansted before travelling by car to the gallops of trainer Ed Dunlop, then on to the stables of Henry Cecil and Sir Michael Stoute. Later that afternoon, he'd watch Frankie Dettori ride two winners. ▶

Iconic...Ryan Giggs and Tony Adams watch the Welshman's shot beat David Seaman

Ferguson had bought his first racehorse the previous year – named Queensland Star after a vessel his father had worked on in the Govan shipyards. The world of racing was his latest fascination. An escape from the demands of the day job had never been so welcome as it was on this day. A Champions League semi-final second leg away to Juventus loomed less than a week away, and the previous evening Ferguson had overseen one of the most dramatic matches of his managerial career.

Meetings between United and Arsenal had long been box-office events. But since Arsene Wenger had arrived at Highbury in the early weeks of the 1996-97 season, these clashes brought together the two best teams English football had to offer. The previous campaign had seen Arsenal usurp United atop the Premier League and claim the double after winning the FA Cup.

Before they were drawn as opponents in the 1998-99 FA Cup semi-final, the Gunners were unbeaten in their last five clashes with Ferguson's men, a run that included what was effectively a title-deciding victory at Old Trafford a year earlier and resounding back-to-back 3-0 drubbings, first in the Charity Shield then in an early season showdown at Highbury.

It was the beginning of an era-defining rivalry, and it was starting to look one-sided.

"Manchester United were flying," recalls Arsenal midfielder Emmanuel Petit. "They were the reference in the Premier League with Alex Ferguson. They had so many brilliant, amazing players, but we closed the gap in winning the double and putting pressure after the Charity Shield as well. It was not easy for Alex Ferguson and his players anymore. That was our target and we did it."

"That was a great Arsenal team but losing the title to them really helped our mentality in the next season," says United defender Ronny Johnsen.

Controversy...Roy Keane remonstrates with the linesman after having a goal disallowed in the first semi-final

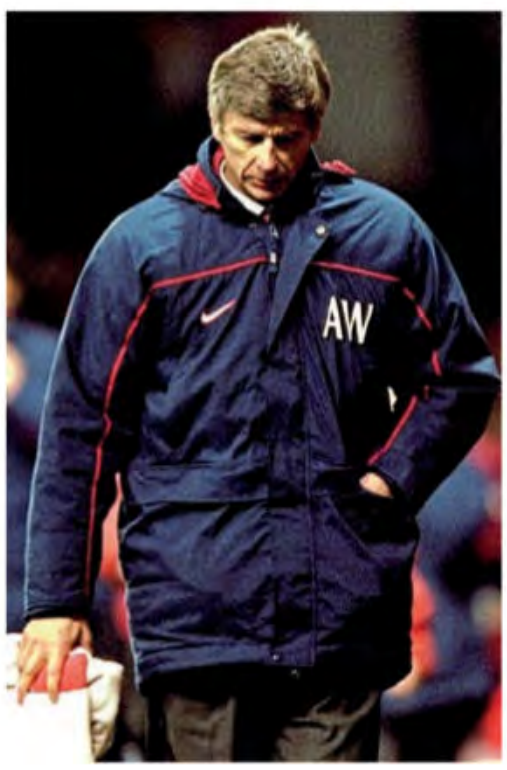
> "That game was the turning of the tide in the 1998-99 season"
>
> Arsenal right-back Lee Dixon

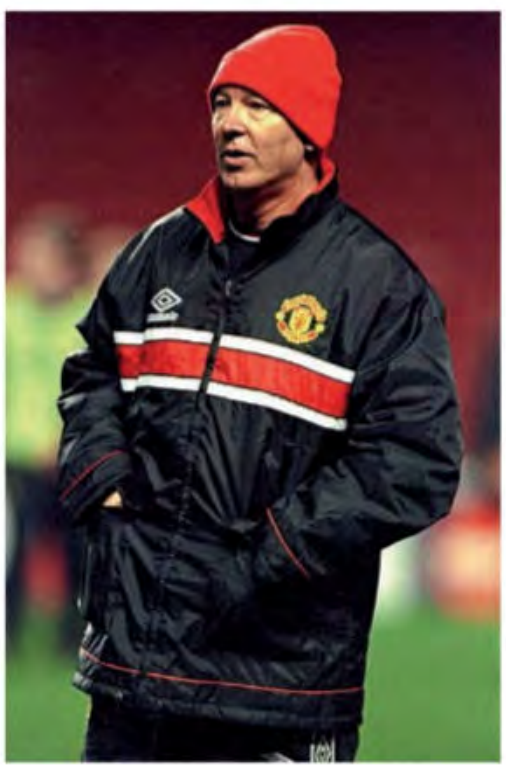
"When you experience that, you don't want to experience it again. It was really tough."

The two sides were as good as deadlocked at the top of the Premier League table, with United one point ahead but Arsenal having a game in hand. The semi-final on neutral territory at Villa Park would not only decide which team would progress to the FA Cup final but also who could claim crucial momentum for the season's final stretch.

And first time around, all the associated tension was on display as United and Arsenal drew 0-0, necessitating what was to be the last-ever replay in the FA Cup semi-finals.

United left that first meeting aggrieved. What looked a legitimate Roy Keane goal had been ruled out for a dubious offside in the build-up.





Iconic managers ...Arsene Wenger and Alex Ferguson

Perhaps fuelled by that injustice, the Red Devils struck first in the rematch.

In the Charity Shield back at Wembley, some Arsenal fans had held up a banner reading "BECKSCUM", an unimaginative jibe aimed at David Beckham just weeks after he'd been sent off in England's defeat to Argentina at the 1998 World Cup. Thousands sang: "You let your country down" and booed the midfielder's every touch.

Beckham's response to his nationwide vilification was to produce a campaign's worth of performances that would earn him the runners-up spot in the 1999 Ballon d'Or vote. His curling 25-yard strike to beat David Seaman in the 17th minute was his third goal in five games.

The pulsating action gathered more pace in the second half. The Gunners' Dutch master Dennis Bergkamp levelled the score in the 69th minute when his speculative 30-yard drive deflected off Jaap Stam to leave Peter Schmeichel stranded. Five minutes later, United captain Keane was sent off when a late challenge on Marc Overmars earned him a second yellow card.

The action seemed to peak in stoppage time when Phil Neville hauled down Ray Parlour inside United's penalty area.

"Well, the treble's over," says Steve McClaren, United's assistant manager, recalling his thoughts when Arsenal were awarded a last-gasp spot kick. "If you want to put your mortgage on anyone scoring a penalty, it's Bergkamp. The game's over."

"When the penalty was given, I thought 'OK, that's it,'" says Johnsen. "It was quite late in the game, stoppage time. And it was Bergkamp. He'd probably score 98 times out of 100."

The tension was proving too much for Martin Edwards. The United chairman had taken himself off for a nervous stroll as the final minutes ticked away.

"I did it twice in my life," he says. "The other time was in Rotterdam when we won the Cup Winners' Cup. I didn't come out after half-time. I was that bloody nervous. I sat and watched it on a TV screen in the lounge, where I could walk up and down. Then I went out for the celebration. At Villa Park, I was walking around the car park."

But Bergkamp wasn't quite the infallible penalty taker the United contingent believed him to be. He'd seen three of his previous five efforts saved. On this occasion, he side-footed a strike to Schmeichel's left, neither low nor high and too close to the goalkeeper's dive. The giant Dane beat away the ball.

Into extra-time and the tiredness of both teams was evident. Except for one man. In the heart of a congested schedule, Ferguson had rotated his squad. Jesper Blomqvist was chosen to start instead of Ryan Giggs. With just over an hour played, United's most dynamic dribbler had entered the fray.

"I remember when Giggsy came on just thinking: 'Give him the ball because they are knackered,'" says United midfielder Nicky Butt. "'Just give him the ball and let him run at them.'"

In the 109th minute, the winger obliged. Intercepting a fatigued infield pass from Patrick Vieira, Giggs burst forward from inside the United half, slaloming past Lee Dixon and Martin Keown and evading a desperate sliding challenge from Tony Adams before rifling high above Seaman and into the Arsenal net. A classic match had been settled by an historic goal.

"I didn't realise how good the goal was until I re-watched it," Butt says. "To go through probably the strongest midfield in Europe other than ours and one of the strongest back fours, and then to beat one of the best goalkeepers in the world in David Seaman, in a big game, it was phenomenal.

"It was a phenomenal game. I think that goal stamped that game as the best I probably ever played in, when you think about all the drama. It has to be the best game I've ever played in."

"You always think to yourself, 'If only...'" says Pat Rice, Arsenal's assistant manager throughout Wenger's Highbury reign. "If only you'd got to Giggs higher up the pitch. Could you have played him inside? Could you have intercepted the ball? All these things. But when it was necessary to do something, you just didn't do it. It was difficult to take the ball off Giggsy when he was having a bad game. When he was having a good game, it was nigh-on impossible.

"You've got to hold your hands up and say it was a brilliant, brilliant goal. If this had have been one of our players, you'd say it was possibly in the running for one of the best goals ever."

After scoring, Giggs jubilantly peeled off his white United away jersey to reveal a thickly carpeted chest, providing this unforgettable game perhaps its most iconic image.

United fans flooded the pitch at the final whistle. Those of Ferguson's side who were not quick enough down the tunnel to escape the rush were carried from the field as triumphant heroes – while also being plundered for mementos.

"I remember after the game, the fans stormed onto the pitch and we were carried around the pitch," Johnsen says. "I couldn't get off the pitch. Somebody tried to nick my shorts. I thought: 'I can't take these off!' My shin pads, socks, everything was gone. It was a big, big celebration and what a fantastic game."

A week later, United won 3-2 against Juventus in Turin. They went on to beat Newcastle United in the FA Cup final and Bayern Munich in the Champions League final, having pipped Arsenal to the Premier League title by a single point.

"That's how close it was between Arsenal and Man. United in that era," says Parlour. "United were a very special side, a brilliant side, to win the treble that year. We had a penalty kick to maybe get in the final again that season. The momentum definitely turned. That gave them a massive lift."

"That game was the turning of the tide in the 1998-99 season," Lee Dixon agrees. "The performances we'd had leading up to that season just validated everything that we were doing. We really felt powerful. Ryan Giggs' goal changed everything, for us and them.

"Tony Adams and I went into the United dressing room after the game as we came off the pitch to wish them all the best in the final. It's probably the hardest thing I've ever done. It massively stuck in my throat because they were all jumping up and down, popping corks. I said: 'Tone, we've got to do it.' He said: 'Come on then.' So we went in and just said: 'Lads, amazing game. Good luck in the final. Hope you win.' We didn't mean any of it!"

Between the popping champagne bottles, ecstatic celebrations and the reluctant congratulations of their opponents, Ferguson had a final message for his side before he set his thoughts to relaxing at the races the next day. His words perfectly encapsulated the spirit that drove his team to unparalleled success.

"We never gave up," he said. "The time to give up is when you're dead."

Ryan Baldi is the author of *Arsene Who? The story of Wenger's 1998 Double* and *They Always Score: The Unforgettable, Improbable, Iconic Story of Manchester United's Treble Winners*

BOTTOM: Jubilant... David Beckham celebrates on the pitch with United fans

BELOW: Bad blood...Arsenal supporters taunt Beckham during their 1998 Charity Shield showdown

Facetoface

MARCO ROSSI

"To get out of our group, we will need to play fantastic football"

The Hungary coach discusses how his team is shaping up ahead of this summer's European Championship

How do you reflect on the qualification campaign of your team for Euro 2024?
We had a really good year with very good qualifiers, results and matches. It was a bit unexpected to finish first in our group because we had been drawn with Serbia, who, on paper, are much better than us. In the end, we achieved the most important target – to qualify for Euro 2024. We succeeded, so we are happy for that. But of course, football gives no time to reflect on what you have achieved. There are new targets and we have the desire to play a very good European Championship.

You drew against smaller opposition like Lithuania and Bulgaria. Should your team be more imposing at times?
You know, against smaller teams, you can often face different difficulties – they defend deep, they play on the counter-attack. Every team has some good players that can cause you problems if you are not fully concentrated on your task. Sometimes there are surprises, but if we were able to defeat England, Germany and other bigger teams than us, it's because we can imagine that it can also happen to us at the hands of smaller teams. In football today, nothing is easy. We have to be prepared. On paper, a team can be smaller, but you can still face quite an organised team. Every match must be played and every match has its difficulties.

How has your team evolved since the last European Championship in 2021?
We have a very good team. We improved smaller details, both defensively and offensively, in transition, in set-piece situations, adding tactical variations and being more cautious in other situations. In every training camp, we always try to add something. That doesn't mean that we improve every time because we have to take into account our opponent. We are in a process of development and I hope that this process can continue. At Euro 2024, I want to see the maturity of my team in terms of the mental aspect and personality. I would like to see a step forward.

Since being in charge you have played with a three-man defence, sometimes a five-man, sometimes a regular four-man back line. Have you been exploring different systems in the sense of adapting to the level of your opponents?
In 2018 we started playing with four defenders. We went to three and we returned to a back four, playing different systems. I don't think that the system is making a difference. The principles are what matters. Of course, it's important for the players that they are comfortable, or at least in a system in which they could be more involved and more confident. We are indeed playing with three central defenders. At the last European Championship, we played a 3-5-2. After the tournament, we introduced the 3-4-2-1 and our players are a fit for this system. They are feeling good. At the moment, from a tactical point of view, we are not planning too many changes.

What are your defining principles?
These kinds of principles are different according to the system. I'm not talking just to talk, I'm talking because I experience all these different systems. A three-man

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Fully recovered...Hungary goalkeeper Peter Gulacsi missed the majority of 2023 after injuring his ACL in autumn 2022

defence can allow you to be more or less attacking, more or less defensive, depending on the circumstances, depending on the opponent, depending on the results, and depending on what is more convenient for you to do in a single moment of the match. This doesn't mean that it's a better system but it gives you these options. I watched Bayer Leverkusen several times and they often play with the same system, using similar principles. At this level, when we are talking about the top level in the European Championship, the main principles are quite similar.

Your Euro 2020 squad had 12 home-based players. This time the squad will feature more players based abroad. Is that a positive development for your players?
In the last call-up [March's international break], we had only four home-based players. The Hungarian championship is ranked [23rd in the UEFA coefficients], so it's a good thing to have players abroad. Without injuries, we have eight players from the top leagues. My wish is that every year we could add some more players to the top leagues because of the technical aspect, the intensity, the tactical preparations of the coaches and other aspects.

A couple of years ago, Ferencvaros were doing quite well in European competition. What needs to happen for the Hungarian league to take a step to the next level?
It's a question mark and we have been trying to find the answer for many years in Hungary. It's true that only Ferencvaros can compete at the international level. They reached the Champions League group stage three or four years ago. The other clubs don't reach this level. We must increase the quality of the other clubs. This is the wish of the federation but I don't know how much time it will take.

Can countries and leagues like Hungary still close the gap with Europe's big five leagues?
We talk about this a lot. It's difficult to do this because when you have to compete with leagues that have much more money and can invite and sign players of a different level, this gap can never be closed. The strategy could be to work more on the youth academies, to grow talents that could play at a young age in our league and afterwards be sold abroad. In Hungary, too few coaches are fielding youngsters.

In your last call-up for March's friendlies, you selected Marton Dardai from Hertha Berlin for the first time. How close is this squad to the final squad that you will take to Germany?
All the players we called up are giving us the sense that they will be in the squad for the European Championship. At the moment, I can change a maximum of two or three players, no more. This group of players is quite similar to the group that will take part in the European Championship.

> "We have eight players from the top leagues. My wish is that every year we could add some more players to the top leagues"

Peter Gulacsi was out for almost a year with a knee injury before returning last September. Have you decided who will be your number one in Germany?
Well, I can't say. Gulacsi is the goalkeeper of RB Leipzig, playing at the top level. He played against Real Madrid and did really well. They didn't deserve to lose. Gulacsi is used to playing at this level. On the other hand, Denes Dibusz is a very good goalkeeper at Ferencvaros. He has done well both for club and country – in the qualifiers as well as in the Nations League. Based on this, it's another decision I will have to take.

The left centre-back position must also be a cause for concern...
That's one of the reasons for calling

Famous win...Rossi's Hungary beat England 4-0 away in 2022

up Marton Dardai. He has been in our plans for a bit. We always counted on Attila Szalai, who hasn't been playing much at Hoffenheim [now on loan at Freiburg]. That could be a problem because without match rhythm it is difficult. At the same time, he is the only central defender in that position to have played more than 40 matches for us. Marton is debuting. Gabor Szalai hasn't debuted yet. There are pros and cons in both cases. We will see who can give us the most and more confidence. The position has not yet been defined.

Is there a danger that your team will be over-reliant on captain Dominik Szoboszlai in midfield?
Szoboszlai is our most important player, our top player together with Roland Sallai. They are playing in our system with Roland in a much more offensive role, while Dominik has more freedom to decide which side or which position he takes. He is a key player for sure.

Most important player...Hungary's talismanic captain Dominik Szoboszlai

How have you seen him progress with his club Liverpool?
At the beginning of the season, he played outstandingly. He surprised many of the observers in England and abroad. He then played some lesser matches and afterwards suffered a small injury. Now, he's back. Against Sparta Prague, not a very difficult opponent for Liverpool, he played very well. He returned to action and I think he is in a good mood.

Up front, do you have enough of a back-up for striker Barnabas Varga?
The centre-forward position has always been a bit sensitive. Varga has been playing really well at Ferencvaros, both in the Hungarian league and in the Europa Conference League. He is a player who is quite effective and able to play football. So he is important. Let's hope we will have him in the best of shape. In the

Euro 2024 rivals...Rossi poses with the trophy alongside Switzerland boss Murat Yakin and Germany coach Julian Nagelsmann

Upset...Hungary's players celebrate beating Germany 1-0 away in the 2022-23 UEFA Nations League

final, decisive qualifiers, we played without a few key players and him.

What are your thoughts on your opponents in Group A?
It is the group stage of the European Championship, so you won't be playing against weak opponents. All three teams are very strong with different characteristics. Germany is Germany. They have fantastic players. Every time, even if they are in a difficult moment for different reasons, they have always found solutions. Germany are, of course, the favourites in our group. Switzerland are an elite team with a lot of experience and a lot of qualities. All of their players ply their trade in the top leagues and, in the last 20 years, Switzerland has always qualified for the European Championship and the World Cup. They are always able to progress from the group, so Switzerland is the second favourite in our group. We are together at the level of Scotland, who have very good players – more or less all of them play in the English Premier League or the Championship, with stars that many of us know. I don't see many weaknesses among our opponents. To be able to get out of our group, we will need to play fantastic football in all three matches. It won't be easy.

Can Germany really be considered favourites? Hungary drew 2-2 with them at Euro 2020, but Germany have declined since then...
Germany have top players in every position of the pitch. They have a top coach. So I think that they will find a solution for Euro 2024. Germany is on a different level, even if we played three times against them since Euro 2020 and we were never defeated. But the fact that you played several times without losing a match doesn't mean that it will be the same in the future. They are still the favourites, just like I think that if you win the first match against Switzerland – I don't want to say that it will be decisive – you have got 50 per cent of the job done.

> "It is the group stage of the European Championship, so you won't be playing against weak opponents"

Germany and Switzerland are favourites in your view. Does Hungary have the obligation to get out of the group?
There is no obligation. Germany and Switzerland are ranked in a higher position than us. Even on paper, they are better than us. In Hungary, the current expectations are very high, not just from the fans but also from the federation. This will bring even more pressure. In the previous European Championship, we were in a group with Germany, France and Portugal, so it was normal that we didn't qualify for the round of 16. We came close and it was almost seen as a miracle. Today, progressing from the group will be seen as almost normal because of the results and the performances of the past three years. It won't be normal, according to me.

Depending on the results in Germany and on your contract situation, do you envisage leading Hungary to the 2026 World Cup in North America?
That's our expectation in the long term. My contract is expiring at the end of the World Cup qualifiers. Based on the facts, based on the contract, it could happen. Qualifying for the World Cup is the ultimate aspiration of Hungary – of the Hungarian fans and the federation. Hungary have missed out on every World Cup since 1986.

Interview by Samindra Kunti

Euros rematch...Roland Sallai vies for the ball during Hungary's 2-2 draw with Germany in Munich at Euro 2020

HUGO LLORIS

"I'm looking forward to this new chapter"

The former Tottenham Hotspur goalkeeper and France World Cup winner discusses his decision to cross the Atlantic and sign for MLS giants Los Angeles FC

What were your first impressions of Los Angeles and why did you decide to relocate to the United States and sign for Steve Cherundolo's side?
It's amazing. I love the area because it reminds me a lot of Nice – the ocean, the hills, the mountains. The weather is quite different from London too! We wanted something new, something for the family to discover a new life. I also wanted to keep playing at a good level and LAFC ticked a lot of the boxes. I'm looking forward to this new chapter.

Did you speak to your former Tottenham team-mate Gareth Bale, who won the MLS Cup with LAFC two years ago, before the move to California?
No, I didn't. To be honest, I didn't need it. I had heard about the good structure the club has, the facilities and also the fans: they make it an amazing atmosphere at home matches, something really special. Obviously, it is not at the level of the Premier League but it is still a competitive league that is growing every year.

Did you have any other offers?
There were some Middle-Eastern and Asian options and I knew I needed to leave Europe for a new experience after 19 years as a professional, to find something really fresh and to experience a new lifestyle. I had other options in MLS too. This is a league that's growing, and there's a World Cup here in two years' time so it will be nice to see the evolution of the game in the US. There were a lot of things to take into consideration but I got a good connection with [general manager] John [Thorrington] and [assistant coach] Oka [Nikolov], they were the first people I met, and my mind was made up.

You were linked with a return to your first club, Nice. Was there ever a chance that would happen?
Even if it was a special place for me, my idea was to discover a new continent. But Nice was in my mind during COVID and I could feel then it was the end of an era for me at Tottenham. It was the right moment to move on.

Newcastle United also reportedly showed an interest in signing you. Could you have ever played for another Premier League side?
The Premier League is the best league in the world and I enjoyed my time there. Spurs is a unique club so it would have been strange to stay and play for another English team. For me, it's how I feel football, and there were options. It becomes more difficult year after year at that level. For a full season, it demands a lot. I can feel it when I get up every morning, that's the truth. You have to try to enjoy the time that you have in the game as much as you can.

At 37, and with a highly distinguished career behind you, do you think this will be your last club?
I want to be realistic and I also want this move to make sense. There is a project here and I want to be part of it. There is also a second life after football to think about.

Have you given much thought to what that next step looks like?
Not yet! It will depend on the opportunities and on my family. I will see what the motivation and willingness is like. I won't close any door.

You have a one-year contract at LAFC with the option to stay for 2025. Do you see yourself being tempted to play on at BMO Stadium?
I've been very transparent and honest with the club. I've arrived at a period of my career where everything has to be year by year. I have a one-year contract with a one-year option so we will decide. At the moment, I'm just focused on the initial contract and we will see how it goes from there.

How hard were those final months at Spurs under manager Ange Postecoglou given, unusually for you, you were out of the team and sitting in the stands?
Everything was clear between Ange, the club and myself – from the outside it might have ➤

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Marquee signing...Lloris is unveiled by Los Angeles FC at a press conference in February

looked a bit weird, but on the inside I was really calm. I didn't want to leave just to leave. I wanted to take my time for my family and me. I'm pleased it happened in January, although it was nine months between playing competitive matches.

What was going on behind the scenes before you left, because it appeared you were frozen out after losing the captaincy to Son Heung-min?
They wanted a new era and I was part of the last era. We all expected I would leave in the summer and I can't say it was an easy six months. It was frustrating, training every day without a goal was different. I kept working because it was important to be ready for January. I was talking with clubs in December. I spent 11-and-a-half years at one club and, if you look at the industry, that will become very rare. I'm happy and proud of what I achieved and I felt I could leave Tottenham at peace with that.

You were given a farewell to supporters at the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium in December, but do you wish you could have done that with a final game?
These are things you can't control and I was just glad I could say goodbye to the fans against Bournemouth at half-time of the game on New Year's Eve. I felt really privileged to be able to do that. There was a really strong relationship with the club and fans so it was really important for me to be able to go and do that at the stadium and I am very grateful to the club for allowing me to do it. I will always remember the first games I played for Lyon and Tottenham.

What do you make of Postecoglou's Spurs and how the Australian has transformed the team that finished eighth last term?
I thought they would have a great season. I believe they will reach the top four, they are playing really well and the most important thing is they have got their DNA back. Ange deserves a lot of credit for the impact he made in such a short time. He has been fantastic and it was really interesting to be part of the training sessions. I tried to understand his demands, I found it really interesting. I had respect for him even if I wasn't playing. He's brought

> "They wanted a new era and I was part of the last era"
> Lloris on his decision to leave Tottenham

Disappointing final game...Lloris' final Premier League appearance was last season's 6-1 defeat at Newcastle United

MLS debut...Lloris in action for LAFC during the win over Seattle Sounders

the footballing way back at Spurs and ultimately it is an aggressive team playing really high up the pitch. For sure it is the beginning of a new era and that work they are doing will be rewarded. They are probably some way away from winning the title because the Premier League is so strong and you are competing with the best teams.

You must be fired-up to win silverware. Can LAFC regain the MLS Cup?

As soon as I get on the field, my motivation is to win and right now we are focused on the early stages of the season. It is important for us to get the right rhythm and a level of consistency. We hope we can get to the play-offs and then, if we do that, they are a different type of game and you have to have the consistency and desire to get through that and push on to try to win the title.

Interview by Matthew Nash

Spurs farewell ...Lloris says goodbye to fans at the Tottenham Hotspur Stadium

SRECKO KATANEC

"With 48 teams at the World Cup, a quarter of the matches won't be interesting"

The experienced Slovenian coach, who guided his home country to qualification for Euro 2000 and the 2002 World Cup, is now aiming to take Uzbekistan to their first-ever World Cup finals

Uzbekistan reached the quarter-finals at the recent Asian Cup and went out undefeated, on penalties against the host nation Qatar. How do you assess the performances and results of your team?
I think that we achieved a good result and that we left a positive impression. Our main problem was that we missed five players from our best XI. Nevertheless, we came very close to reaching the semi-finals. I think that we deserved to decide that game [against Qatar in the quarter-finals] in our favour, before extra-time and penalties.

Your best player, captain and top goalscorer Eldor Shomurodov missed the Asian Cup with a foot injury. How much did your team miss him?
It's a shame that he was sidelined with that injury. I've been the national coach for two-and-a-half years, and he was never injured. If he had been with us, I'm sure he would have scored four or five goals. With him, we would have possibly finished as Asian Cup winners. But that we will never know. In any case, Shomurodov [69 caps, 38 goals] is to us what Messi is to Argentina.

There are several young, talented players in your team, the likes of Abdukodir Khusanov, Abbosbek Fayzullaev and Diyor Kholmatov. It seems that the Uzbekistan national team has a very bright future.
It's true that we have potential. Our Under-20 team won the Asian Cup and the Under-23s reached the Asian Cup final. In Qatar, we were the only team with three youngsters in the starting line-up. But, as we know, U20 level compared to full international level is another pair of shoes. For example, when Fayzullaev gets into a duel with a centre-back of 2 metres and 100kg, that's another world. He spoke to me about this during the Asian Cup.

Eight, possibly nine Asian teams will qualify for the 2026 World Cup, so Uzbekistan have a great chance of qualifying for the first time. But previously you've argued that your team should qualify by merit and not thanks to an inflated tournament...
I believe that we have a realistic chance of qualifying, but in the past Uzbekistan also had several realistic chances. The qualifying process is a long and hard battle. All teams, also the smaller teams, are trying to get stronger. Some of them, it seems to me in a strange way, with naturalised players. For example, at the Asian Cup, Syria suddenly had three new players: two Argentine-born players and a Colombian-born one, while Hong Kong, our opponents in World Cup qualifying, had three Brazilian-born players. We have only Uzbeks in our team. Therefore, in spite of more slots, it will be difficult to qualify.

Regarding inflated tournaments, I said the same about the Euros, which should have kept the format with 16 teams. Back then you had a tournament with real quality. With 48 teams at the World Cup, a quarter of the matches won't be interesting because the quality gap is too big.

There were many entertaining games at the Asian Cup. What did you think of the overall quality of football?
I think that the quality of football was quite good. In Asia, in general, teams are getting closer to each other in terms of competitiveness. Most matches were quite even. Earlier, Australia would have won 7-0 against India, while now it was only 2-0, with the first goal thanks to a big goalkeeping mistake. I was a bit surprised, in a negative sense, by South Korea, Japan and Iran. I don't know the reasons why they didn't show more. It's clear that it's good if you have players who play at the top level in European leagues, like Japan and Korea obviously have, but at the Asian Cup they were poor. Japan looked as if they played with 50 per cent of their normal strength. Also Son Heung-min, who is a top player, was struggling. Korea conceded three goals against Malaysia, and they have Kim Min-jae from Bayern Munich in defence. ➤

Uzbekistan boss...Katanec watches his team's clash against Qatar in the 2023 Asian Cup quarter-finals

An unusually large number of goals were scored in added time. Do you think there's a reason for that?
I think that in general, not only in Asian football, but overall, players are not as physically prepared as they used to be. I know how much we trained in my time. We trained a lot – I even think we trained too much – while today, obviously they train less. I think we had more strength than players nowadays. Of course, I cannot prove this, because simply there is no data. Nobody measured us back then. All the time we see data on the distances players ran during a game. We see 12km and one thinks that it's a lot. But what counts is how many sprints were in those 12km – surely three or four km is just walking. Also, we hear all the time how much faster the game has become, but in fact 90 per cent of the teams play a lot more positionally, the ball is so often played back to goalkeepers and the build-up play from defence happens actually rather slowly.

On the other hand, football has changed drastically since the introduction of the rule where five changes are allowed. Nowadays, if you are behind in the last 20 minutes, you can sub on two or three attackers and easily turn the game around. Of course, that rule favours big clubs and big national teams, who have more resources to have a bigger number of quality back-up players.

What did you think of Qatar, who managed to successfully defend their Asian Cup title?
They were well organised and looked solid. I didn't expect them to win the title. All credit to them. Congrats also to their national coach [Tintin Marquez] who took over the team only a month before the tournament. That's not easy. Still, I think they were very dependent on one player. If you took out Akram Afif, it could have been a different story.

Who would have expected that Jordan would reach the final. That was a great surprise, wasn't it?
Yes, that was a surprise. I thought that Japan and South Korea were the favourites. Jordan had great teamwork. Their team has played together for quite a long time. They function as a real unit. When I took over Uzbekistan [in 2021], we played a friendly against them and we lost 3-0. They are a good team; with Mousa Al Tamari, who plays in France [with Montpellier] they have a top player, so their success didn't come by chance.

Apart from short spells with Gorica and Olympiakos, your entire coaching career has been with national teams – Slovenia, North Macedonia, the United Arab Emirates, Iraq and Uzbekistan. Is that just a coincidence or do you prefer to work with national teams?
Maybe it had to do with the fact that in my early years I qualified with Slovenia, against the odds, for two major tournaments. I've never had my own agent who followed me through my whole football career. For the jobs I got, sometimes people had approached me directly, while sometimes I had the help of agents who were my good friends. Perhaps, if I had had an agent, I would have signed with some clubs. But, I have no regrets. I'm happy how things worked out. Now I'm 60, so I think it's too late for some big club jobs.

By qualifying for Euro 2024, Slovenia have made it to a major tournament for the first time since the 2010 World Cup. What do you think of the current team and what can they achieve this summer?
To be honest, I haven't followed them closely. Because of the time difference I haven't watched their games. Whenever they played during a FIFA date, I was somewhere in Asia, where it was 3am or 4am. It is nice that they qualified. It would have been a pity if they hadn't, given the opponents in their qualifying group [Denmark, Finland, Northern Ireland, Kazakhstan and San Marino]. The generation has changed since the period when I was last manager [in 2017]. Younger players arrived and I wish Slovenia good luck at Euro 2024. They are in a tough group [with England, Denmark and Serbia], but perhaps they can surprise.

Interview by Vladimir Novak

> "[Eldor] Shomurodov is to us what Messi is to Argentina…with him, we would have possibly finished as Asian Cup winners"
> Katanec on Uzbekistan's talisman missing the Asian Cup

Asian Cup heartbreak ...Uzbekistan players react to their penalty shootout defeat to Qatar in Al Khor

International experience...Katanec watches his North Macedonia team hold England to a 0-0 draw at Old Trafford in a Euro 2008 qualifier

"Uzbekistan's Messi"...Eldor Shomurodov will play a key role as the Uzbeks aim to qualify for the 2026 World Cup

Glenn Moore

USA return to winning ways

The USWNT bounce back from last year's World Cup disappointment to lift the inaugural CONCACAF W Gold Cup

Lindsay Horan angered many followers of the US women's team she captains when she said, earlier this year, that: "American soccer fans, most of them aren't smart. They don't know the game. They don't understand."

The remarks were understandably resented and she apologised, but it was timely nonetheless that it was the Lyon midfielder who rose at the back post to head in what proved the only goal of the CONCACAF W Gold Cup final.

While the US are used to winning CONCACAF events – this was their tenth success in 11 attempts (including the CONCACAF W Championship) – this triumph meant more than most.

For a start, the rebranded tournament had more depth than its precursors due to the presence of the last four from the 2022 Copa America Femenina as part of a 12-team event – four more nations than any previous CONCACAF finals tournament. The fact that all four made the quarter-finals, and Brazil the final, highlighted the difference in quality that made.

Then there was the hangover from last year's disastrous World Cup, when the US won just one of their four games – against debutants Vietnam. They were knocked out on penalties by Sweden, so a few nightmares were exorcised when they defeated Canada in a semi-final shootout.

Finally, the tournament also served as a warm-up for this summer's Olympics, even mimicking the format.

That was the case also for Brazil, Canada and Colombia, the first two of which were also recuperating after traumatic World Cups. Brazil, in particular, looked in good shape under Arthur Elias, who took over from Pia Sundhage after their group-stage exit in Australia last summer.

"The biggest thing is the preparation for the Olympics," said Elias after the final. "I said so at the beginning, and now I repeat that."

Brazil conceded twice in six games – and might have kept Horan out in the final if Rafaelle had been fit. The former Arsenal centre-half made the tournament's official best XI along with midfielder Yasmin of Corinthians, one of six domestic-based players in Brazil's final team.

A trio of Americans also made the selection: Horan, goalkeeper Alyssa Naeher, who saved three penalties and scored one in the shootout against Canada, and 19-year-old Jaedyn Shaw, who hit four goals and won the Golden Ball in a breakthrough tournament. Yet for all of the San Diego Wave forward's huge promise, and that of the more established Trinity Rodman (21) and Sophia Smith (23), it was a veteran that interim head coach Twila Kilgore turned to when the knockouts began.

> While the US are used to winning CONCACAF events – this was their tenth success in 11 attempts – this triumph meant more than most

Alex Morgan, a late call-up when Mia Fishel was ruled out by an ACL injury, became the starting striker and soon underlined her enduring class. Morgan will be 35 when Paris 2024 kicks off but, having scored in three Olympics, could be heading for a fourth.

CONCACAF W Gold Cup winners...USA lift the trophy after defeating Brazil 1-0 in the final

USA captain...Lindsey Horan celebrates the semi-final shootout victory over Canada

That will be one of many tricky decisions for incoming coach Emma Hayes as she tries to balance youth and experience. Does she include Gotham's Jenna Nighswonger (23), Paris Saint-Germain's Korbin Albert (20) and Sam Coffey (25), who also impressed on their tournament debuts, the latter pair forming a double-pivot behind Horan?

Canada and Mexico provided three players apiece for the XI, including top scorers Adriana Leon (six goals) and Jacqueline Ovalle (five). Mexico pulled off the biggest CONCACAF shock in years when goals from Ovalle and Mayra Pelayo-Bernal secured a 2-0 win over the US in the group stage, only their second in 43 meetings, their first in the US, and first since 2010.

Moreover, it was deserved. Having missed out on the 2023 World Cup, Mexico may be about to reap the benefits of their domestic investment: 20 of their squad play in Liga MX Femenil.

Elsewhere, as ever, it was one step forward and another back for Jamaica and Haiti, two World Cup performers, who failed to negotiate the qualifying process. This was modelled on UEFA's Nations League with the same intention of providing meaningful matches, which is vitally important when many CONCACAF women's teams are neglected outside tournaments.

The Jamaican federation's long-running dispute with its players undercut the Reggae Girlz building on their historic World Cup, while Haiti missed out in the play-in round, losing to Puerto Rico.

Of the five teams from Central America and the Caribbean that did make it to the finals, Dominican Republic, El Salvador and Panama lost all of their games with a combined goal difference of -37. Though Costa Rica and Puerto Rico each won one, they were against El Salvador and Panama respectively.

With both having identical records, Costa Rica progressed on the drawing of lots. Nevertheless, debutants Puerto Rico were delighted. "We did fantastic, super proud," Nat Gonzalez, their coach, said. "This is a big step for the island. The future is bright."

But the gap is huge. El Salvador coach Eric Acuna noted: "We were at the bottom. We have barely stepped on the second step. People want us to run up the steps. It's not going to be like that. El Salvador does not have a league. Climbing the second step is going to cost us."

This deficit is often made up by players from the diaspora, but that's a short-term fix. Yet when Panama's Marta Cox – whose free-kick goal against France lit up the World Cup – spoke out by complaining about the facilities in her country following Panama's group-stage exit, she was slapped down.

"She's out of shape. She's fat. She couldn't move on the pitch," responded federation president Manuel Arias. An apology on his behalf was later issued.

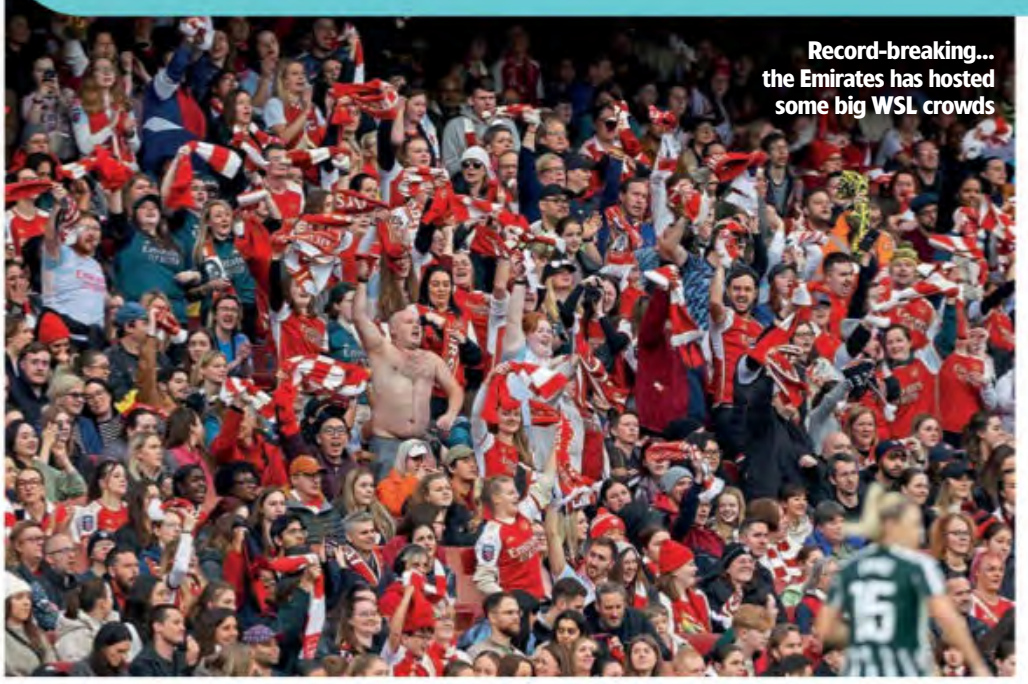
In a statement through Panama's Association of Professional Footballers, Cox said: "After the World Cup, I expected so much more. That desire to see steady progress led me to speak out."

Costa Rica, Argentina, Paraguay and Colombia went out in the quarters. In the semis, Brazil beat Mexico 3-0 and, on a ridiculously waterlogged pitch, US put out Canada after a 2-2 draw.

By then, the crowds had arrived. Early gates were poor; even the US only drew 3,242 and 8,315 to Carson's 27,000-capacity venue for matches against Dominican Republic and Argentina.

Come the final though, San Diego's Snapdragon Stadium was full with a crowd of 31,528. There will be football politics to solve going forward, but it was a sign that, in the medium-term at least, combining all the Americas may be the future for this event.

Round-up



Record-breaking... the Emirates has hosted some big WSL crowds

CROWDS FLOCK TO WSL

The cumulative attendance for England's Women's Super League broke the competition record with six rounds still to play. The 32,970 who attended Stamford Bridge to see Chelsea beat Arsenal 3-1 took the overall figure to 717,721, an average around 7,500.

Arsenal have led the way, recording four gates in excess of 50,000 with one match at the Emirates still to play. Despite other games being staged at Boreham Wood's 4,500-capacity venue, their average was higher than half of the men's Premier League.

Germany's Frauen Bundesliga reported gates in 2022-23 tripling to 2,723. However, clubs lost an average €1.8m, a 20 per cent rise on the previous year.

TOUGH QUALIFYING DRAW FOR EUROPEAN CHAMPIONS

The draw for the 2025 Euros threw up a challenging qualifying group for holders England, paired with Nations League finalists France and World Cup semi-finalists Sweden. Republic of Ireland make up Group A3 from which only two automatically progress to the Swiss-hosted finals with third and fourth place going into play-offs.

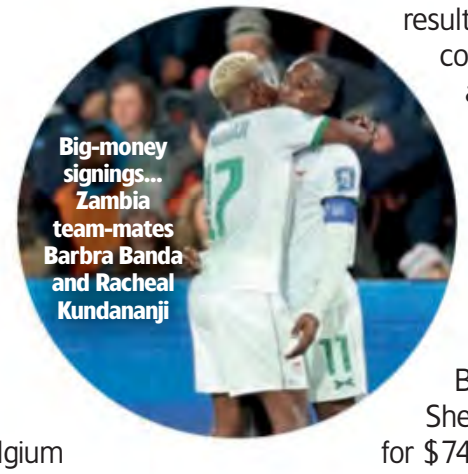
World champions Spain should glide through Group A2 against Denmark, Belgium and Czech Republic, while the Netherlands will be favourites to top Group A1 ahead of Norway, Italy and Finland. Group A4 features Germany, Austria, Iceland and Poland.

The two-legged play-offs will pit the eight League A nations not already qualified against eight League C teams, and a dozen League B teams against each other. The 14 winners meet in a seeded second round. Put simply, most League A teams will qualify for the 16-nation event.

Euro 2025 trophy...qualifying takes place April to July, with the play-offs kicking off in the autumn

MORGAN WINNER HELPS JUSTIFY STONEY CLAIM

Alex Morgan scored the only goal in the NWSL Challenge Cup as Shield winners San Diego Wave beat play-off champions Gotham FC. The result backed-up Wave coach Casey Stoney's assertion that Wave, by winning the regular season, were 2023's best team.



Big-money signings... Zambia team-mates Barbra Banda and Racheal Kundananji

BANDA FOLLOWS KUNDANANJI TO US

Zambian striker Barbra Banda left Shanghai Shengli for Orlando Pride for $740,000, just days before the NWSL kicked off. It made her the second-most expensive player in the sport after international team-mate Racheal Kundananji was signed by Bay FC for $860,000 in February.

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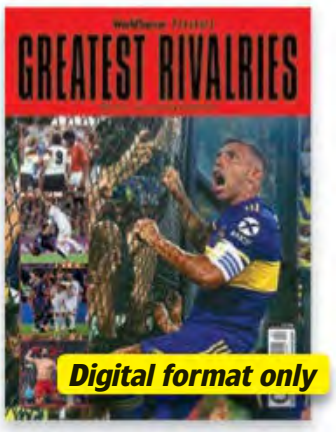

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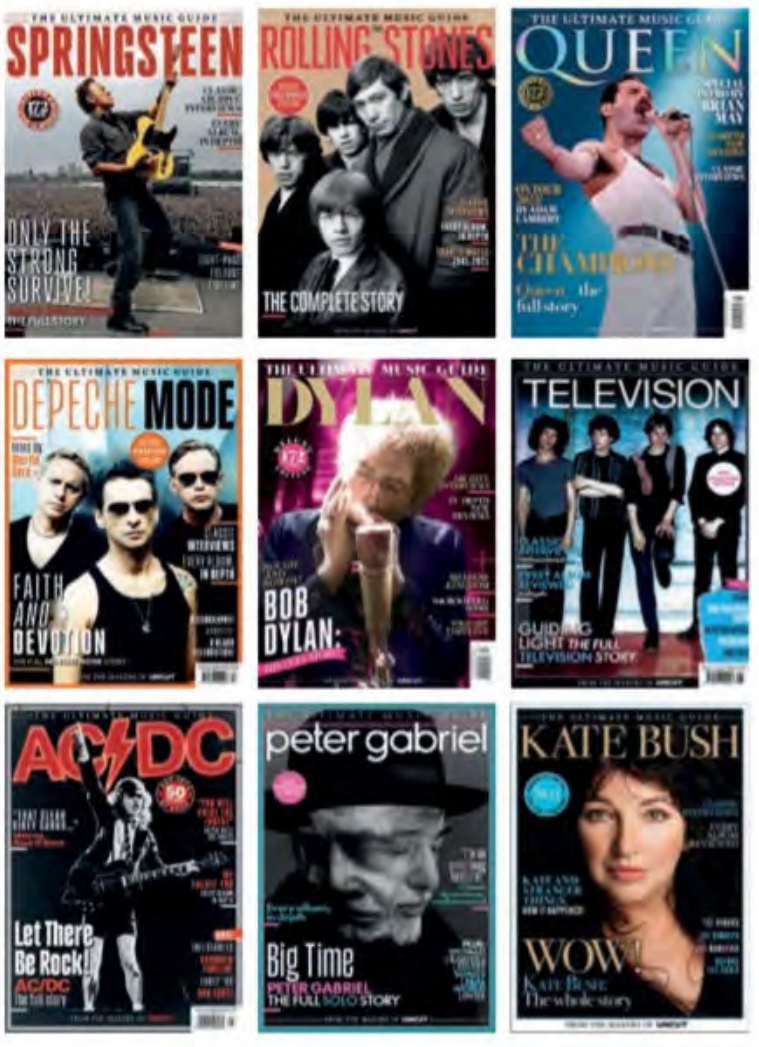

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78 80 84

TIM VICKERY
Copa Libertadores, Copa Sudamericana & Brazil

82

JOHN DUERDEN
Asian Champions League

88

NEEL SHELAT
Malaysia

DANNY LEWIS
Canada

86

STEVE MENARY
Tajikistan

90

82

PLUS

Asian Champions League...knockout stage update

NEWS
78 Copa Libertadores
80 Copa Sudamericana
82 Asian Champions League
84 Brazil: Campeonato Brasileiro
86 Canadian Premier League
88 Malaysia Super League
90 Tajikistan

DIARY
91 Global diary

SQUADS
92 Italy: Serie A 2023-24

RESULTS, TABLES, FIXTURES
94 Internationals
96 Club football

84

Campeonato Brasileiro Serie A...2024 season preview

South America

TIM VICKERY

Preview

Brazilian teams plot route to Buenos Aires

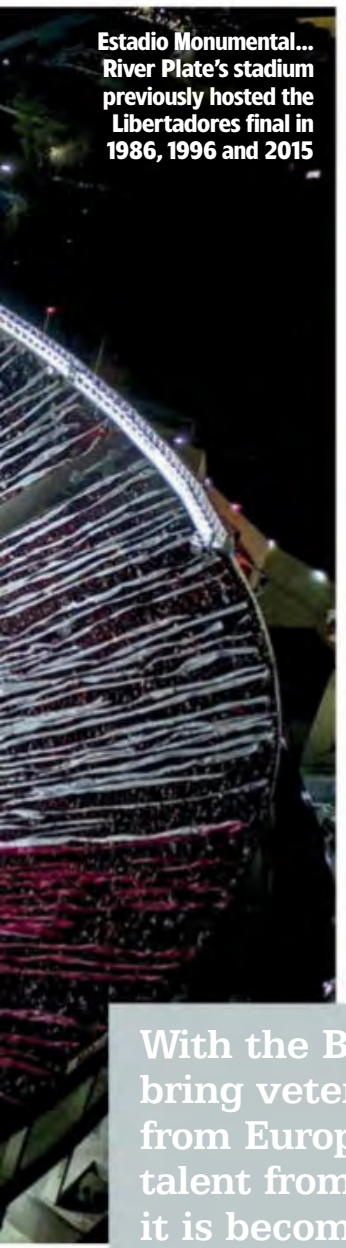
Argentina's capital city will host the 2024 Copa Libertadores final – which will almost certainly be contested by at least one side from Brazil

Fluminense made it five consecutive Brazilian triumphs in the Copa Libertadores last year, and the smart money would be on a sixth. All three of the recent champions are back in the field – Fluminense with more attacking options than in 2023, Palmeiras with a coach (the Portuguese Abel Ferreira) who always seems able to come up with a plan, and Flamengo perhaps the overall favourites with the depth of their squad and the quality of their coach Tite. And then there are Atletico Mineiro, who finished last year as powerfully as a freight train, Sao Paulo, a club which takes pride in its special relationship with the Libertadores, a Gremio side full of momentum and, the only one never to have won the trophy, a Botafogo team looking to make peace with their fans after letting the league title slip away last year and who have fought through the qualifying rounds to take their place in the group phase.

With the Brazilian clubs able to bring veterans and misfits back from Europe, while also hoovering up talent from the rest of the continent, it is becoming increasingly hard for the others to compete.

At least Boca Juniors prevented a fourth

Even more attacking options ...Fluminense have signed former Brazil winger Douglas Costa



Estadio Monumental... River Plate's stadium previously hosted the Libertadores final in 1986, 1996 and 2015

Copa favourites ...Brazil striker Pedro will lead Flamengo's bid

51st appearance ...Uruguayan side Nacional advanced through qualifying

consecutive all-Brazilian final last year. But it was hardly inspiring. They needed a succession of shootouts after failing to win a single match in the knockout phase, and they are not back this year. Indeed, the generalised mediocrity of Argentine club football is highlighted by the fact that only one club from the 2023 Libertadores is back this time around – and River Plate may well be the biggest threat to the Brazilians.

The final on November 30 will be in their home city of Buenos Aires, and probably in their stadium, now with the biggest capacity in South America. It probably helps that they have been drawn in the only group without a team from Brazil as, year after year, they have found the Brazilians an obstacle they cannot get over. Last season, they were knocked out in the last 16 by Internacional, having already lost 5-1 to Fluminense in the group stage – their heaviest defeat in Libertadores history. The team forged by Martin Demichelis are undeniably attractive. The key question, though, will be how well they can defend against Brazilian firepower.

> With the Brazilian clubs able to bring veterans and misfits back from Europe and also hoovering up talent from the rest of the continent, it is becoming increasingly hard for the others to compete

Estudiantes are probably the pick of the rest of the teams from Argentina – although their campaign is complicated by the presence in their group of Gremio plus altitude specialists The Strongest of Bolivia. Talleres of Cordoba are also interesting but, like San Lorenzo, they have fallen into a group that in addition to a Brazilian giant also features a contender from Ecuador – the surprise success story of recent South American football.

In with Sao Paulo and Talleres are Barcelona of Guayaquil, who, without the advantage of altitude, are the only club from outside Brazil and Argentina to have reached two semi-finals since the current, year-long format was introduced in 2017.

In perhaps the most interesting group, Palmeiras and San Lorenzo are up against surprise Uruguayan champions Liverpool plus the continually astonishing Independiente del Valle, the little club from the outskirts of Quito who have had a hand in producing so many of the current Ecuador national team.

Also in the competition are the 2008 winners and current champions of the Copa Sudamericana, Liga of Quito, or LDU, who can bank on a little bit of quality, plenty of cup knowhow and the altitude of their mountain base.

LDU are in the same group as Junior from Barranquilla in Colombia, who along with Millonarios will help to improve the country's surprisingly poor recent record in the competition. Since Atletico Nacional won the trophy in 2016, the last time the Libertadores was played over just half the year, no Colombian side has come anywhere near putting in a challenge.

The recent record of Chile is even worse. In the last five years, only one Chilean club has made it out the group phase. Hopes are high that this time 1991 winners Colo-Colo will at least be competitive. They are coached by Argentina's Jorge Almiron, who took Boca Juniors through to last year's final, have Arturo Vidal back where his career started and should be battle-hardened after negotiating the qualifying rounds.

The consistent over-achievers are Paraguay. Back in the competition for the 45th time, Cerro Porteno will probably be competing with Colo-Colo for a place in the last 16, while Libertad, recently the dominant domestic force, will hope to benefit from being drawn in the only group without a Brazilian team.

Libertad will likely be competing with Alvaro Recoba's Nacional, who showed flashes of promise during the qualifying rounds. The Uruguayan pair of Nacional and Penarol have more experience than anyone else in the continent (taking part for the 51st and 49th time respectively). Both have glorious pasts, but the last time a Uruguayan side won the trophy was in 1988, and that is highly unlikely to change this year.

Still, they have more chance than the representatives of Peru (ten years without getting a team through to the knockout rounds) or Venezuela (with just one team through to the last 16 in the same period). At least the Peruvians showed signs of looking more competitive last year, while the Venezuelan big two – Caracas and Deportivo Tachira – are back after missing out in 2023. They will have done extremely well if they are still in the hat by the time the group phase comes to a close at the end of May and the field of 32 is whittled down to 16.

GROUP STAGE DRAW

GROUP A
- Fluminense
- Cerro Porteno
- Alianza Lima
- Colo-Colo

GROUP B
- Sao Paulo
- Barcelona
- Talleres
- Cobresal

GROUP C
- Gremio
- Estudiantes
- The Strongest
- Huachipato

GROUP D
- LDU
- Junior
- Universitario
- Botafogo

GROUP E
- Flamengo
- Bolivar
- Millonarios
- Palestino

GROUP F
- Palmeiras
- Independiente del Valle
- San Lorenzo
- Liverpool

GROUP G
- Penarol
- Atletico Mineiro
- Rosario Central
- Caracas

GROUP H
- River Plate
- Libertad
- Deportivo Tachira
- Nacional

South America

TIM VICKERY

Hope for the little guys

While Argentine giants Boca Juniors should be favourites, the Copa Sudamericana always offers hope for the outsiders

Tough to visit ...Always Ready play at one of the highest stadiums in South America

Ecuadorian clubs have won this competition the past two seasons, and on three of the last five occasions. This is remarkable given the extent to which the Copa Sudamericana is weighted towards Brazil and Argentina. The big two have six clubs each, or 12 of the field of 32.

It could certainly be argued that with so many representatives in the Copa Libertadores, those Brazilian and Argentine teams in the Sudamericana are not the best. This is true up to a point. But Brazil's Internacional, for example, have assembled a highly impressive squad, and were only minutes away from facing Boca Juniors in the final of last year's Libertadores – and now both clubs are taking part in the Sudamericana. Boca's group, along with last year's runners-up Fortaleza of Brazil, looks especially interesting because only the top team in the group goes through to the knockout stage automatically. The team finishing second goes into a play-off round against one of the eight teams coming out of the Libertadores – the clubs that come third in their group in that competition.

The fact that eight potential big hitters are not even in the competition yet makes the Sudamericana tough to predict. Last year, for example, Brazil's Corinthians came out of the Libertadores and went all the way to the semi-finals. In 2022, Ecuador's Independiente del Valle did even better – from third in their Libertadores group to winners of the Sudamericana, a route also trodden in 2020 by Argentina's Defensa y Justicia.

As well as Internacional and

2024 Copa Sudamericana favourites...Boca Juniors of Argentina and Brazilian outfit Internacional

Boca, the early favourites would have to include Athletico Paranaense and perhaps Corinthians as well, although their group clashes with Argentinos Juniors look interesting. Of Brazil's other representatives, Ronaldo's low-budget Cruzeiro would placate their restless fans with an international trophy, Cuiaba will relish consolidating their status with a continental adventure and Red Bull Bragantino enjoyed a very good domestic campaign last year.

One team that no one will relish visiting is Bolivia's Always Ready. Their tight new stadium is at one of the highest points of La Paz

From Argentina, Gustavo Costas' Racing side can be guaranteed to be competitive, while Lanus have their moments and Defensa y Justicia are consistently interesting.

Outside the big two, one team that no one will relish visiting is Bolivia's Always Ready. Their tight new stadium is at one of the highest points of La Paz and, intelligently run, the club have a squad with some young, dynamic players who aim at rhythm designed to hurt the opposition at altitude. They did not quite win a place in the group phase of the Libertadores, but they came very close – losing narrowly on penalties to Uruguay's Nacional – and their form in those qualifying rounds would appear to indicate that they may be a surprise Sudamericana force.

Union La Calera of Chile have been good to watch in recent years, while compatriots Coquimbo Unido did extremely well to outclass local giants Universidad Catolica in the brief, one-legged qualifying round, where Delfin of Ecuador also stood out.

One of the main justifications of this competition is to give international opportunities to clubs who are not accustomed to such adventures, and so one of the highlights of that round came from Paraguay where little Sportivo Ameliano outplayed mighty Olimpia, eliminating a club that has won the Libertadores three times and which only a few months ago reached the last eight of the premier continental competition, defeating Flamengo along the way. In last year's debut campaign, they did not get past the domestic qualifying round. Now Sportivo Ameliano need their passports at the ready.

Group stage debutants ...Paraguay's Sportivo Ameliano

GROUP STAGE DRAW

GROUP A
- Defensa y Justicia
- Independiente Medellin
- Universidad Cesar Vallejo
- Always Ready

GROUP B
- Cruzeiro
- Union La Calera
- Universidad Catolica
- Alianza

GROUP C
- Internacional
- Delfin
- Belgrano
- Real Tomayapo

GROUP D
- Boca Juniors
- Fortaleza
- Nacional Potosi
- Sportivo Trinidense

GROUP E
- Athletico Paranaense
- Danubio
- Sportivo Ameliano
- Deportivo Rayo Zuliano

GROUP F
- Corinthians
- Argentinos Juniors
- Racing
- Nacional

GROUP G
- Lanus
- Metropolitanos
- Cuiaba
- Deportivo Garcilaso

GROUP H
- Racing
- Coquimbo Unido
- Sportivo Luqueno
- Red Bull Bragantino

Asia

JOHN DUERDEN

And then there were four

2023-24 AFC Champions League campaign is whittled down to the regional finals after thrilling quarter-finals

If the semi-finals of the Asian Champions League are as dramatic as the quarters then there should be plenty to look forward to in April. In the eastern zone (the tournament is divided into two geographic zones until the final) it is another Japan v South Korea affair as Yokohama F. Marinos – led by Harry Kewell and looking for a first-ever continental crown – take on Ulsan HD, going for a third title. In the west, the rivalry between the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia is not quite as fierce but the meeting between Al Ain and Al Hilal should be tasty indeed.

After all, Al Ain disposed of Al Hilal's bitter Riyadh rivals Al Nassr in the quarter-finals in what was a classic encounter. Al Nassr may have attacking riches with Cristiano Ronaldo, Sadio Mane and others, but they can't defend.

Champions League thriller...Al Nassr and Al Ain served up plenty of drama in their riveting quarter-final clash

caption

Record breakers... Al Hilal's impressive winning streak continued

Into the final four...Ulsan HD

Al Ain disposed of Al Hilal's bitter Riyadh rivals Al Nassr in the quarter-finals in what was a classic encounter

In their two Saudi Pro League home games preceding the two ties with Al Ain, they conceded seven goals against teams that had been in the bottom four, so it was no surprise that they lost the first leg in the UAE 1-0 thanks to a goal from lively Moroccan forward Soufiane Rahimi. The only surprise was that the deficit wasn't greater meaning that there was all to play for in the second leg in Riyadh.

When Rahimi scored two more in the first half of the second leg, it looked to be all over. But there was still just enough time for Al Nassr to pull one back before half-time and when a second was added just after the restart, things really started to get interesting. With 18 minutes remaining, Brazilian left-back Alex Telles made it 3-2 for the hosts on the night and 3-3 on aggregate.

It was a night of goalkeeping howlers. Khalid Eisa was at fault for three of Al Nassr's goals and Raghed Al Najjar spilled a cross in extra-time for Sultan Al Shamsi to put Al Ain back in front. Ronaldo wasn't much better, missing chance after chance, and even shooting wide from two yards out with the goalkeeper on the floor to the general disbelief of the 23,000 fans in attendance and the man himself. He finally got on the scoresheet from the penalty spot, notching to make it 4-4 on aggregate with two minutes remaining. He scored again in the subsequent penalty shootout, but his team-mates Marcelo Brozovic, Alex Telles and Otavio did not and Al Nassr crashed out.

Despite the closeness of the scoreline, Al Ain fully deserved the win overall. The winners of the first-ever AFC Champions League in 2003 have a pleasing mix of local talent, such as Bandar Al Ahbabi and Eisa, and difference-making foreign players, like prolific Togolese striker Kodjo Fo-Doh Laba, Kaku from Paraguay and Rahimi.

Their coach, Hernan Crespo, knows that Al Hilal will be a different task. The Argentine was in charge of Al Duhail in the last Champions League when, at the same semi-final stage, the Qataris were thrashed 7-0 by the Saudi Arabians who are the most successful club in Asia with four titles.

Semi-final debutants...Yokohama boss Harry Kewell has guided the Japanese outfit to the last four

They are on course for five after disposing of Al Ittihad, two-time winners and defending Saudi Arabian champions, 4-0 on aggregate in the quarter-finals. The second-leg 2-0 win, in front of 40,000 fans in Jeddah, was noteworthy also as it was a 28th consecutive victory for the club, breaking the world record for top-tier teams set by The New Saints of Wales in 2016. Unsurprisingly, Al Hilal are the favourites to beat Al Ain and whoever they may meet in the final.

Ulsan HD are the remaining South Korean team after defeating fellow K-League outfit Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors 2-1 on aggregate. After a 1-1 first-leg draw in Jeonju, a lovely side-footed volley from Seol Young-woo gave the Tigers a 1-0 win at home as Ulsan, champions in 2012 and 2020, moved into the last four. Ulsan will fancy their chances of a third title and under head coach Hong Myung-bo – South Korea's captain at the 2002 World Cup – they will relish taking on Yokohama who defeated China's sole remaining representative Shandong Taishan 3-1 on aggregate.

Despite being a Japanese powerhouse and winning J. League titles under Ange Postecoglou in 2019 and Kevin Muscat in 2022, Yokohama don't have a great continental record. This year marks the first time that they have got past the last 16, so Kewell has already achieved something that his two Australian predecessors could not.

The teams from the east are just getting going in their domestic seasons while those to the west are almost finished. It remains to be seen who benefits from this, but neutrals will be smiling if the semi-finals are as exciting as the round that came before.

Brazil

TIM VICKERY

Big guns ready for top-flight shootout

Familiar favourites lead the race for Brazil's national championship, but chaotic schedule adds unpredictability

Preview

As the 2024 Brazilian Serie A campaign rolls into action, the league's status as the strongest in South America is as safe as ever. Clever membership schemes have encouraged fans to turn up in unprecedented numbers – last year's average crowd of over 26,000 was the highest in the history of the Brazilian championship. So are the clubs now ready to take over the running of the competition, on something like Premier League lines?

It would seem not. Plans have floundered, with the clubs divided into two blocks which seem mainly concerned with negotiating broadcast rights. Key issues such as improving the pitches and, crucially, sorting out the calendar, are not even under discussion.

It is the very issue of the calendar that adds an air of unpredictability to a competition which, like so many around the world, is moving in the opposite direction. More money

Last chance to shine...wonderkid Endrick will leave Palmeiras for Real Madrid in July

Title favourites ...Flamengo

comes in, but the inequalities of its distribution allow massive financial gaps to open up between clubs, and a restricted group end up sharing out the silverware.

But in Brazil, the games come so thick and fast at certain times of the season that even the biggest clubs are forced to prioritise, and the league often takes a back seat as the focus shifts to the domestic cup or the Copa Libertadores. This was clearly a factor in Botafogo's surprise lead last year, and their eventual collapse. In the closing weeks, when guns were fully trained on the league, they fell away and the same old gang came through – the teams who have won in all of the last few years.

Top of that pile are reigning champions Palmeiras. Their squad seems too young and thin for yet another title triumph, but head coach Abel Ferreira has made miracles commonplace. The pre-season favourites, though, are surely Flamengo, with former Brazil manager Tite, an intimidating array of attacking talent and, they hope, signings to plug a defensive problem which goes back four years. Elsewhere, having finished last season like a train and ahead of their first full campaign in their new stadium and with a new manager, Atletico Mineiro cannot be discounted.

This trio have monopolised the title for the last six years. The chasing pack is led by reigning Libertadores champions Fluminense, whose coach Fernando Diniz no longer has to share his time with the national team. Plenty of attacking reinforcements have arrived, but the spotlight might well fall on the defence – and much the same is true of Gremio, who could have been serious title contenders last year had they not conceded so many goals. Luis Suarez departing, it could be that their Porto Alegre rivals Internacional can put in a stronger challenge in what looks like a promising season for coach Eduardo Coudet. And with Lucas Moura opting to stay, Sao Paulo go into the campaign with high hopes.

After coming through last year's battle against relegation, there is a buzz around Bahia this season. Part of the City Football Group, funds have started to arrive for reinforcements – World Cup midfielder Everton Ribeiro from Flamengo is the biggest name – and expectations are rising. Further up the northeast, Fortaleza are anxious to prove that their remarkable rise under coach Juan Pablo Vojvoda did not peak with last year's Copa Sudamericana final. Another team from outside the southeast/south axis striving to continue their consolidation are Cuiaba, who have just lost coach Antonio Oliveira to Corinthians.

> In Brazil, the games come so thick and fast at certain times of the season that even the biggest clubs are forced to prioritise

The early signs are that Oliveira has steadied the ship at his new club. But Corinthians, champions in 2017, remain hampered by financial turmoil. Another club to have made a coaching change this year are the always ambitious Athletico Paranaense, whose surprise decision to appoint the Colombian Juan Carlos Osorio did not survive the first defeat. Cuca, a journeyman coach most recently in charge of Corinthians and Atletico Mineiro, has now been tasked with steering the ship.

Red Bull Bragantino were in surprise contention for the title until the closing weeks of last season, and it will be interesting to see if Pedro Caixinha can work something similar this year. Vasco da Gama hope that they have come through the turbulence of a difficult season back in the first division, and will aim higher under Ramon Diaz. Another Argentine coach, Nicolas Larcamon, is in charge of Cruzeiro, where owner Ronaldo's low-cost regime may well test the patience of the supporters.

And then there is Botafogo, who have been chewing up coaches ever since the dream – and apparent near certainty – of the title fell apart. This year will be a test of their reaction.

And that leaves the four newly-promoted teams: Juventude, Vitoria, Criciuma and Atletico Goianiense. None will have an easy ride. True, there is even more unpredictability in the air this year with the Copa America set to take some players out of action for up to nine games. This is increasingly relevant because Brazil is hoovering up talent from neighbouring countries, and teams can now field nine foreigners. Even so, it looks a fair bet that all four of the new teams will have to work hard to maintain their status.

Chasing pack...Marcelo will star for Copa Libertadores champions Fluminense again in 2024

Canada

DANNY LEWIS

2024 CPL set for kick-off

Cavalry and Forge expected to lead the way in the sixth edition of the Canadian Premier League

Shield holders...Cavalry players lift the 2023 CPL Shield after topping the regular season league table *Credit: Cavalry FC*

Signs of the Canadian Premier League's impact within the country continue ahead of its sixth season, with seven of the league's alumni making it into Canada's preliminary squad for their vital 2024 Copa America play-in against Trinidad & Tobago.

Cavalry and Forge also recently gained invaluable experience in the CONCACAF Champions Cup. Both suffered defeat in round one, losing to MLS's Orlando City and Mexican outfit Guadalajara respectively, but the former were making their first foray into continental competition and enjoyed a slice of history when Myer Bevan scored their first CONCACAF goal.

The route into the 2025 edition of the CONCACAF Champions Cup for CPL clubs will be either through winning the CPL Shield by finishing top of the regular season, or by winning the North Star Cup via the end-of-season play-offs.

Cavalry won their first silverware last season, topping the league table by 13 points, and now want to add more. Tommy Wheeldon Jr. and his team have already displayed their ability to develop players while achieving success, which will have played a key role in the loan signings of Everton goalkeeper Jack Barrett and attacking midfielder Lucas Dias from Sporting.

The Cavs suffered defeat in a breathtaking play-off final against Forge last term, with Bobby Smyrniotis' side now having won at that stage in four seasons out of five. Despite being so imperious at the end of the season, Forge's only regular campaign win came in 2021.

Their hopes of putting that right in 2024 have been somewhat harmed by player departures. Woobens Pacius became the latest CPL player to be snapped up by an MLS team when he joined Nashville during the off-season; Rezart Rama, Aboubacar Sissoko and Manjrekar James have transferred elsewhere, while Ashtone Morgan has retired. Even so, much of their core remains intact, with Elimane Cisse returning from two years playing in Africa and four-cap Ghana international Nana Opoku Ampomah also joining.

HFX Wanderers recorded their highest finish in a full-length CPL campaign last season to reach the play-offs for just the second time in their history. Guided by 2023 Coach of the Year nominee Patrice Gheisar, they will be looking to build on that and have brought defender Julian Dunn back to Canada after two years with Norwegian side HamKam in addition to signing Brazilian midfielder Vitor Dias.

On the face of it, Pacific had an impressive campaign last term as they reached the semi-final of the Canadian Championship and play-offs while finishing fourth in the regular season. They will still feel that the campaign could have offered so much more after topping the table for 11 matchweeks having lost just one of their first 12 league games.

The Tridents are the only club outside of Forge to have won the CPL play-offs – doing so in 2021 – and they have added experience to avoid similar struggles to those endured in the latter stages of last season. One-cap Canada

Preview

CONCACAF Champions Cup...Forge players celebrate after scoring against Guadalajara

goalkeeper Sean Melvin and French midfielder Aly Ndom, formerly of Reims and Auxerre, have come in.

York United capitalised on last season's introduction of a fifth play-off spot to reach that stage for the second time before losing to Pacific. They have also boosted their 2024 squad with a goalkeeper, in the shape of Frenchman Thomas Vincensini, alongside the intriguing loan signings of Monterrey duo Orlando Botello and Josue Martinez, as well as Netherlands-born centre-back Frank Sturing, who represented Canada twice in 2021 having previously won caps for the Dutch at various youth levels and spent last season in the Austrian second tier.

Atletico Ottawa won the 2022 regular season and were runners-up in the play-offs but endured a frustrating campaign last term, finishing sixth and missing out on a play-off place by two points. They have responded with an exciting transfer window. In addition to signing Sissoko from Forge, they have brought in two of last season's standout performers from Valour, Golden Glove nominee Rayane Yesli and Best Canadian Under-21 Player Matteo de Brienne, plus one-cap Canada winger Kris Twardek from Irish side Bohemians.

Vancouver FC finished seventh in their first-ever campaign and will hope to push higher with the help of some eye-catching signings. They made 16-year-old Grady McDonnell the youngest-ever player to sign a CPL contract after bringing in the Republic of Ireland Under-17 midfielder from Vancouver Whitecaps' academy.

Cavalry won their first silverware last season, topping the league table by 13 points, and now want to add more

In addition, centre-back David Norman Jr. returns to the league having helped Northampton Town to promotion and St Patrick's Athletic to FAI Cup glory in the space of a year.

Valour have witnessed plenty of squad changes in the transfer window ahead of the 2024 season as they aim to make a maiden foray into the play-offs. Noah Verhoeven has joined on loan from Atletico Ottawa while German defender Charalampos Chantzopoulos and Australian forward Jordan Swibel have arrived from abroad to replace the departing Diego Gutierrez (Cavalry), De Brienne and Yesli.

New arrivals... David Norman Jr. (L) and Jordan Swibel (R) have joined Vancouver and Valour respectively

Malaysia

NEEL SHELAT

Johor Darul Ta'zim and their decade of dominance

After ten consecutive Super League titles could the Malaysian champions' superiority be coming to an end?

In Malaysia, the Super League is shifting from a year-round format to a cross-year competition for the 2024-25 season. The biggest change, though, might come at the top of the table. Defending champions Johor Darul Ta'zim completed a decade of dominance by lifting their tenth straight league title at the end of 2023 as part of a domestic treble, but they should now be considered the underdogs – at least, that is, according to the Crown Prince of Johor.

Tunku Ismail ibni Sultan Ibrahim, who was recently appointed as the Regent of Johor, is the man behind all of JDT's success in the last ten years. Founded in 1972 as PKENJ FC and later rebranded to Johor FC in 1996, the club did not have a single major title in their cabinet as recently as 2012, but then everything changed.

At the time, it was not just Johor FC but Johorean football in general that was in a sorry state of decline. With a population of over four million, Johor is the second-largest of Malaysia's 13 states, yet getting

Decade of dominance ...Malaysian champions Johor Darul Ta'zim line up in the AFC Champions League

State of the art...JDT's impressive Sultan Ibrahim Stadium

that huge population interested in football was a struggle due to out-dated infrastructure, poorly performing clubs and allegations of match-fixing. Amid pleas from the few remaining local fans, Tunku Ismail – commonly known as TMJ, an abbreviation of his title – took over as President of the Johor Football Association (PBNJ).

TMJ is credited with weeding out many of the issues in the FA by withdrawing most of the region's clubs from the national pyramid and devoting the majority of their efforts – and most importantly his investment – to the newly-named JDT. The club went big in their first windows with royal patronage, signing players from major clubs in Spain, Argentina, Portugal, Greece, Brazil and Germany.

Such an injection of cash and quality instantly took JDT from being relegation battlers in 2012 to title challengers in 2013 – finishing third, just three points off top spot – and then Super League champions in 2014. They were also able to recruit a lot of key domestic players from their rivals at the top of the table due to their financial issues, so signs of a dynasty slowly began to emerge.

Year after year, Johor Darul Ta'zim seemed to set new records. In 2015, they became not just the first Malaysian club to lift a continental trophy but also the first Southeast Asian side to win the AFC Cup as they defeated FC Istiklol 1-0 in the final in Tajikistan. A year later, they won a domestic double with an invincible league campaign to boot. In the subsequent season, they became the first team to win four consecutive Super League titles and extend their unbeaten home record in the league to an incredible five full seasons.

> Year after year, Johor Darul Ta'zim seemed to set new records

JDT were quite clearly the most dominant force in Malaysian football by this point, but they had no intentions of slowing down. Not only were they the biggest contributors of players to the Malaysian national team, but they also had the strongest contingent of foreign players and continued to invest in infrastructure and development facilities that most other clubs in the country could hardly dream of.

The crowning jewel of their progress was unveiled in 2020 when the state-of-the-art 40,000-seater Sultan Ibrahim Stadium was inaugurated. On their new turf, JDT remained as imperious as ever, completing another invincible league season despite the COVID-induced disruption. The pandemic also served to weaken JDT's rivals, so their domestic dominance peaked in 2022 and 2023 with back-to-back domestic trebles, all without losing a single game, to add to their trophy cabinet.

The good times, though, appear to be coming to an end ahead of the new season. The Southern Tigers are cutting their budget significantly as part of a financial restructuring. In a social media post in which he labelled JDT as "underdogs" for the new season, TMJ cited the lack of ticket sales at the new stadium as a reason behind this move.

Most Malaysian football experts, however, disagree with him. While TMJ did say that the club would see significant departures, they still have a strong cohort of domestic talent, including 21-year-old attacking starlet Arif Aiman – already an integral part of the national team – and an excellent recruitment department to find international signings of good value.

More importantly, though, the struggles of all the other Super League clubs mean that JDT do not really have a noteworthy contender to reckon with – certainly not one who looks likely to pop up after consecutive seasons of undefeated trebles.

It would appear that Johor Darul Ta'zim have progressed so far in the last decade that even standing still will now keep them out of their domestic rivals' sights.

Foreign import...former Italy U21 forward Fernando Forestieri

Rising star...Malaysia's Arif Aiman scores at the Asian Cup

Tajikistan

STEVE MENARY

'It's brought the country together'

Petar Segrt, the man who led Tajikistan to the quarter-finals of their first-ever Asian Cup, reflects on the epic journey after stepping down from his role as head coach

Tajik hero... Segrt stepped down after two years in charge of Tajikistan

Walking away at the top is hard but after bringing unprecedented levels of success to the footballing backwater of Tajikistan, Petar Segrt has done just that.

After winning the 2022 King's Cup in Thailand and the Merdeka Tournament in Malaysia last October, the veteran Croatian took his unheralded side to the quarter-finals of this year's Asian Cup in Qatar – then quit.

"It was so much better than everyone expected; it was a sensation," says Segrt. "People thought we could maybe get to the second round but not the quarter-finals. In Tajikistan, it's the biggest success, and not just in football, it's brought the whole country together."

Tajikistan were drawn in a tough group alongside the hosts, Lebanon and China. After a 0-0 draw with the latter, Segrt's side lost a tight game with Qatar by a single goal in front of 57,460 fans, before a make-or-break clash against Lebanon. A stoppage-time goal from Nuriddin Khamrokulov of Regar-TadAZ gave Tajikistan a 2-1 victory and the runners-up spot behind Qatar.

Celebrations... Tajikistan players give their coach the bumps after reaching the Asian Cup quarter-finals

"It was unbelievable when we won that game, it was when heroes were made," says Segrt. "When we beat the United Arab Emirates in the next round [5-3 on penalties after a 1-1 draw] it was like we had won the Asian Cup.

"We lost [1-0] to Jordan but they were very good and reached the final, and now I am empty of energy. When I went back to Tajikistan, I know how Ronaldo and Messi felt: everyone wanted my picture and it was too much. It was so much more than me. It was the rest of the coaching staff and the players. The real heroes are the players."

Segrt was able to draw on a 27-year record as a coach, including spells in charge of Georgia, Afghanistan and the Maldives, when he took over Tajikistan. He explains: "I know how to behave. I have been working in Muslim countries for 12-13 years and Tajikistan is also close to Russia. You need to be strong and know when to lead, but the biggest thing was to bring harmony and to bring rules and establish relationships based on respect. The players need to respect everyone from the kit man upwards."

Tajikistan's eye-catching performance will undoubtedly now generate overseas interest in their players like Istiklol winger Ehson Panjshanbe, who impressed and was included in many pundits' Team of the Tournament. "At the tournament, we had 11 players playing outside but now people are interested in the Tajikistan players. Everyone can see how strong they are and more people will be interested," says Segrt.

According to the 57-year-old, he was approached by two "Arab countries" during the tournament but was not interested. "Everyone was talking about it because it was crazy money, but I said to stop talking about it until after the tournament," explains Segrt, who has left on good terms and returned to Germany for a rest.

> "When I went back to Tajikistan, I know how Ronaldo and Messi felt: everyone wanted my picture"

Under Segrt, Tajikistan also made a good start to the 2026 World Cup qualifiers, denied a win over Jordan in a 1-1 draw in Dushanbe by a late goal before thrashing Pakistan 6-1 in Islamabad. It is not surprising, then, that the federation have opted for continuity: Segrt's assistant, former Georgia international Gela Shekiladze, has stepped into the hot seat. A double-header against Saudi Arabia was a tough baptism of fire for him but, given the nation's heroics at the Asian Cup, they will believe anything is now possible.

APRIL 12-MAY 10

Global diary

Games and dates to pencil in for the month ahead

Champions Leagues

After the quarter-final second legs conclude on April 16 and 17, only four teams will remain in this year's UEFA Champions League. In the semis, the winners of Bayern Munich v Arsenal will face the winners of Real Madrid v Manchester City, while on the other side of the draw Atletico Madrid or Borussia Dortmund will face either Paris Saint-Germain or Barcelona. The first legs of the semis will be on April 30 and May 1, with the second legs following a week later. The equivalent stages of the Europa League and Conference League will take place in the same week as the Champions League. For the full draws, turn to pages 96 and 97.

In the women's Champions League, the semi-finals are a weekend affair, with the first legs taking place on April 20-21 and the second legs a week later.

The UEFA Youth League is also close to concluding, with the semi-finals – featuring Olympiakos v Nantes and Porto v Milan – on April 19 before the final in Nyon, Switzerland, three days later.

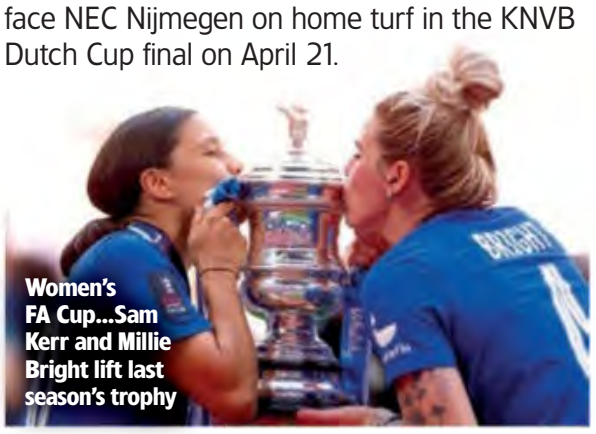
Around the rest of the world, the Asian Champions League semi-finals take place on April 16-17 and April 23-24, the African version on April 19-20 and April 26-27, and the CONCACAF Champions Cup on April 23-25 and April 30-May 2. You can find the full draws for all three competitions on pages 97-98.

Up for grabs... the UEFA Champions League trophy

Domestic cups

April 20-21 is FA Cup semi-final weekend, with EFL side Coventry City facing Manchester United and Manchester City taking on Chelsea. The Women's FA Cup semi-finals take place a week earlier, as Manchester United meet Chelsea and Tottenham face Leicester City on April 14. The final is at Wembley on May 12.

Elsewhere, the Coppa Italia semi-final second legs are on April 23-24, with 14-time winners Juventus travelling to Lazio before last year's runners-up Fiorentina visit Atalanta ahead of the final on May 15. In the Netherlands, Feyenoord face NEC Nijmegen on home turf in the KNVB Dutch Cup final on April 21.



Women's FA Cup...Sam Kerr and Millie Bright lift last season's trophy

EFL play-offs

The race for promotion is really heating up across the English Football League. The regular League One and League Two seasons conclude on April 27, with the play-off finals to follow on May 18 and May 19 respectively. The Championship is a week behind that schedule, with the regular season ending on May 4, and the play-off final on May 26.

Drama guaranteed... the EFL play-offs rarely disappoint

5 unmissable matches

- **Real Madrid v Barcelona, April 21**
  Xavi will make his last trip to the Bernabeu as Barca boss determined to make a big statement. Although his team have been out of the title race for much of this season, a win here would give Madrid a nervy run-in.

- **Milan v Internazionale, April 22**
  This season's *Scudetto* race has become something of a procession for Inter, and they could cap their domestic campaign with another thrashing of their city rivals; back in September, Milan were on the receiving end of a 5-1 hiding.

- **Tottenham v Arsenal, April 28**
  Arsenal famously won their last league title at White Hart Lane in 2004 – could something similar happen here? Or will Spurs boost their Champions League hopes with a win against their rivals?

Last title...Arsenal celebrate at White Hart Lane

- **Eintracht Frankfurt v Bayer Leverkusen, May 4**
  Leverkusen fans trying to work out when their team will seal the Bundesliga title might have this date circled in their calendars: their third-last game of the season, on the same weekend Bayern Munich visit high-flying Stuttgart.

- **Manchester City v Arsenal, May 5**
  The WSL title race is a three-horse affair between these two sides and holders Chelsea, so this meeting in the penultimate game of the season could be hugely significant. In November, Arsenal beat City with a late goal.

League conclusions

Most of Europe's domestic leagues conclude in late May, but across the globe many campaigns come to an end slightly earlier. Early April sees the conclusion of Brazil's state championships; India's Super League and the Qatar Stars League finish in late April, while May 5 sees the final of Argentina's Copa de la Liga Profesional following the end of the league phase on April 14.

SERIE A 2023-24

ATALANTA

GOALKEEPERS

1	Juan **MUSSO** (Arg)	(29)	06.05.94
29	Marco **CARNESECCHI**	(23)	01.07.00
31	Francesco **ROSSI**	(32)	27.04.91

DEFENDERS

2	Rafael **TOLOI**	(33)	10.10.90
3	Emil **HOLM** (Swe)	(23)	13.05.00
4	Isak **HIEN** (Swe)	(25)	13.01.99
6	Jose **PALOMINO** (Arg)	(34)	05.01.90
19	Berat **DJIMSITI** (Alb)	(31)	19.02.93
20	Mitchel **BAKKER** (Ned)	(23)	20.06.00
22	Matteo **RUGGERI**	(21)	11.07.02
23	Sead **KOLASINAC** (Bih)	(30)	20.06.93
33	Hans **HATEBOER** (Ned)	(30)	09.01.94
42	Giorgio **SCALVINI**	(20)	11.12.03
43	Giovanni **BONFANTI**	(21)	17.01.03
45	Marco **PALESTRA**	(19)	03.03.05
46	Tommaso **DEL LUNGO**	(20)	21.11.03
49	Andrea **CERESOLI**	(21)	25.03.03
53	Pietro **COMI**	(18)	11.06.05
77	Davide **ZAPPACOSTA**	(31)	11.06.92

MIDFIELDERS

7	Teun **KOOPMEINERS** (Ned)	(26)	28.02.98
8	Mario **PASALIC** (Cro)	(29)	09.02.95
13	**EDERSON** (Bra)	(24)	07.07.99
15	Marten **DE ROON** (Ned)	(33)	29.03.91
17	Charles **DE KETELAERE** (Bel)	(23)	10.03.01
25	Michel **ADOPO** (Fra)	(23)	19.07.00
30	Alessandro **CORTINOVIS**	(23)	25.01.01
44	Leonardo **MENDICINO**	(17)	25.06.06
47	Matteo **COLOMBO**	(20)	09.03.04
48	Alberto **MANZONI**	(18)	25.06.05
51	Andrea **BONANOMI**	(18)	31.01.06
59	Aleksey **MIRANCHUK** (Rus)	(28)	17.10.95

FORWARDS

10	El Bilal **TOURE** (Mli)	(22)	03.10.01
11	Ademola **LOOKMAN** (Nga)	(26)	20.10.97
52	Tommaso **DE NIPOTI**	(20)	23.07.03
54	Siren **DIAO** (Spa)	(19)	21.01.05
90	Gianluca **SCAMACCA**	(25)	01.01.99
99	Moustapha **CISSE** (Gui)	(20)	14.09.03

COACH

Gian Piero **GASPERINI**	(66)	26.01.58

BOLOGNA

GOALKEEPERS

23	Nicola **BAGNOLINI**	(20)	14.03.04
28	Lukasz **SKORUPSKI** (Pol)	(32)	05.05.91
34	Federico **RAVAGLIA**	(24)	11.11.99

DEFENDERS

3	Stefan **POSCH** (Aut)	(26)	14.05.97
4	Mihajlo **ILIC** (Srb)	(20)	04.06.03
5	Adama **SOUMAORO** (Fra)	(31)	18.06.92
15	Victor **KRISTIANSEN** (Den)	(21)	16.12.02
16	Tomasso **CORAZZA**	(19)	29.06.04
22	Charalampos **LYKOGIANNIS** (Gre)	(30)	22.10.93
26	Jhon **LUCUMI** (Col)	(25)	26.06.98
29	Lorenzo **DE SILVESTRI**	(35)	23.05.88
31	Sam **BEUKEMA** (Ned)	(25)	17.11.98
33	Riccardo **CALAFIORI**	(21)	19.05.02
66	Wisdom **AMEY**	(18)	11.08.05

MIDFIELDERS

6	Nikola **MORO** (Cro)	(26)	12.03.98
8	Remo **FREULER** (Sui)	(31)	15.04.92
17	Oussama **EL AZZOUZI** (Mar)	(22)	29.05.01
19	Lewis **FERGUSON** (Sco)	(24)	24.08.99
20	Michel **AEBISCHER** (Sui)	(27)	06.01.97
80	Giovanni **FABBIAN**	(21)	14.01.03
82	Kacper **URBANSKI** (Pol)	(19)	07.09.04

FORWARDS

7	Riccardo **ORSOLINI**	(27)	24.01.97
9	Joshua **ZIRKZEE** (Ned)	(22)	22.05.01
10	Jesper **KARLSSON** (Swe)	(25)	25.07.98
11	Dan **NDOYE** (Sui)	(23)	25.10.00
18	Santiago **CASTRO** (Arg)	(19)	18.09.04
21	Jens **ODGAARD** (Den)	(25)	31.03.99
56	Alexis **SAELEMAEKERS** (Bel)	(24)	27.06.99
96	Tommaso **RAVAGLIOLI**	(18)	20.02.06

COACH

Thiago **MOTTA**	(41)	28.08.82

CAGLIARI

GOALKEEPERS

1	Boris **RADUNOVIC** (Srb)	(27)	26.05.96
18	Simone **ARESTI**	(38)	15.03.86
22	Simone **SCUFFET**	(27)	31.05.96
31	Velizar **ILIEV** (Bul)	(18)	20.07.05

DEFENDERS

4	Alberto **DOSSENA**	(25)	13.10.98
17	Pantelis **CHATZIDIAKOS** (Gre)	(27)	18.01.97
23	Mateusz **WIETESKA** (Pol)	(27)	11.02.97
26	Yerry **MINA** (Col)	(29)	23.09.94
27	Tommaso **AUGELLO**	(29)	30.08.94
28	Gabriele **ZAPPA**	(24)	22.12.99
33	Adam **OBERT** (Svk)	(21)	23.08.02
37	**PAULO** (Bra)	(29)	15.07.94
99	Alessandro **DI PARDO**	(24)	18.07.99

MIDFIELDERS

5	Marco **MANCOSU**	(35)	22.08.88
8	Nahitan **NANDEZ** (Uru)	(28)	28.12.95
10	Nicolas **VIOLA**	(34)	12.10.89
14	Alessandro **DEIOLA**	(28)	01.08.95
16	Matteo **PRATI**	(20)	28.12.03
19	Gaetano **ORISTANIO**	(21)	28.09.02
21	Jakub **JANKTO** (Cze)	(28)	19.01.96
25	Ibrahim **SULEMANA** (Gha)	(20)	22.05.03
29	Antoine **MAKOUMBOU** (Cgo)	(25)	18.07.98
70	Gianluca **GAETANO**	(23)	05.05.00

FORWARDS

9	Gianluca **LAPADULA** (Per)	(34)	07.02.90
30	Leonardo **PAVOLETTI**	(35)	26.11.88
32	Andrea **PETAGNA**	(28)	30.06.95
34	Kingstone **MUTANDWA** (Zam)	(21)	05.01.03
35	Alessandro **VINCIGUERRA**	(18)	18.08.05
61	Eldor **SHOMURODOV** (Uzb)	(28)	29.06.95
77	Zito **LUVUMBO** (Ang)	(22)	09.03.02

COACH

Claudio **RANIERI**	(72)	20.10.51

EMPOLI

GOALKEEPERS

1	Samuele **PERISAN**	(26)	21.08.97
12	Jacopo **SEGHETTI**	(19)	17.02.05
25	Elia **CAPRILE**	(22)	25.08.01
99	Etrit **BERISHA** (Alb)	(35)	10.03.89

DEFENDERS

2	Saba **GOGLICHIDZE** (Geo)	(19)	25.06.04
3	Giuseppe **PEZZELLA**	(26)	29.11.97
4	Sebastian **WALUKIEWICZ** (Pol)	(24)	05.04.00
13	Liberato **CACACE** (Nzl)	(23)	27.09.00
19	Bartosz **BERESZYNSKI** (Pol)	(31)	12.07.92
24	Tyronne **EBUEHI** (Nga)	(28)	16.12.95
33	Sebastiano **LUPERTO**	(27)	06.09.96
34	Ardian **ISMAJLI** (Alb)	(27)	30.09.96
38	Gabriele **INDRAGOLI**	(20)	20.02.04

MIDFIELDERS

5	Alberto **GRASSI**	(29)	07.03.95
8	Viktor **KOVALENKO** (Ukr)	(28)	14.02.96
16	Luca **BELARDINELLI**	(23)	14.03.01
18	Razvan **MARIN** (Rou)	(27)	23.05.96
21	Jacopo **FAZZINI**	(21)	16.03.03
27	Szymon **ZURKOWSKI** (Pol)	(26)	25.09.97
29	Youssef **MALEH** (Mar)	(25)	22.08.98
30	Simone **BASTONI**	(27)	05.11.96
39	Andrea **SODERO**	(19)	07.08.04

FORWARDS

7	Stiven **SHPENDI** (Alb)	(20)	19.05.03
9	Francesco **CAPUTO**	(36)	06.08.87
10	M'Baye **NIANG** (Sen)	(29)	19.12.94
11	Emmanuel **GYASI** (Gha)	(30)	11.01.94
17	Alberto **CERRI**	(27)	16.04.96
20	Matteo **CANCELLIERI**	(22)	12.02.02
23	Mattia **DESTRO**	(33)	20.03.91
28	Nicolo **CAMBIAGHI**	(23)	28.12.00
31	Giacomo **CORONA**	(20)	24.02.04
87	Herculano **NABIAN** (Por)	(20)	25.01.04

COACH

Davide **NICOLA**	(51)	05.03.73

FIORENTINA

GOALKEEPERS

1	Pietro **TERRACCIANO**	(34)	08.03.90
30	Tommaso **MARTINELLI**	(18)	06.01.06
40	Tommaso **VANNUCCHI**	(17)	05.03.07
53	Oliver **CHRISTENSEN** (Den)	(25)	22.03.99

DEFENDERS

2	**DODO** (Bra)	(25)	17.11.98
3	Cristiano **BIRAGHI**	(31)	01.09.92
4	Nikola **MILENKOVIC** (Srb)	(26)	12.10.97
16	Luca **RANIERI**	(24)	23.04.99
22	Davide **FARAONI**	(32)	25.10.91
28	Lucas **MARTINEZ QUARTA** (Arg)	(27)	10.05.96
33	Michael **KAYODE**	(19)	10.07.04
37	Pietro **COMUZZO**	(19)	20.02.05
65	Fabiano **PARISI**	(23)	09.11.00

MIDFIELDERS

5	Giacomo **BONAVENTURA**	(34)	22.08.89
6	**ARTHUR** (Bra)	(27)	12.08.96
8	Maxime **LOPEZ** (Fra)	(26)	04.12.97
17	Gaetano **CASTROVILLI**	(27)	17.02.97
19	Gino **INFANTINO** (Arg)	(20)	19.05.03
32	Alfred **DUNCAN** (Gha)	(31)	10.03.93
38	Rolando **MANDRAGORA**	(26)	29.06.97
72	Antonin **BARAK** (Cze)	(29)	03.12.94

FORWARDS

7	Riccardo **SOTTIL**	(24)	03.06.99
9	Lucas **BELTRAN** (Arg)	(23)	29.03.01
10	Nicolas **GONZALEZ** (Arg)	(26)	06.04.98
11	Jonathan **IKONE** (Fra)	(25)	02.05.98
18	M'Bala **NZOLA** (Ang)	(27)	18.08.96
20	Andrea **BELOTTI**	(30)	20.12.93
99	Christian **KOUAME** (Civ)	(26)	06.12.97

COACH

Vincenzo **ITALIANO**	(46)	10.12.77

FROSINONE

GOALKEEPERS

1	Pierluigi **FRATTALI**	(38)	01.12.85
31	Michele **CEROFOLINI**	(25)	04.01.99
37	Lorenzo **PALMISANI**	(19)	12.06.04
80	Stefano **TURATI**	(22)	05.09.01

DEFENDERS

3	Riccardo **MARCHIZZA**	(26)	26.03.98
5	Caleb **OKOLI**	(22)	13.07.01
6	Simone **ROMAGNOLI**	(34)	09.02.90
13	Matjaz **KAMENSEK PAHIC** (Svn)	(19)	04.07.04
20	Pol **LIROLA** (Spa)	(26)	13.08.97
22	Anthony **OYONO** (Gab)	(23)	12.04.01
23	Sergio **KALAJ** (Alb)	(24)	28.01.00
28	Daniel **MACEJ** (Cze)	(19)	29.04.04
30	Ilario **MONTERISI**	(22)	19.12.01
32	Emanuele **VALERI**	(25)	07.12.98
33	Kevin **BONIFAZI**	(27)	19.05.96
47	Mateus **LUSUARDI** (Bra)	(20)	08.01.04

MIDFIELDERS

4	Marco **BRESCIANINI**	(24)	20.01.00
12	**REINIER** (Bra)	(22)	19.01.02
14	Francesco **GELLI**	(27)	15.10.96
15	Isak **VURAL** (Tur)	(17)	28.05.06
16	Luca **GARRITANO**	(30)	11.02.94
19	Nadir **ZORTEA**	(24)	19.06.99
21	Abdou **HARROUI** (Mar)	(26)	13.01.98
27	Arijon **IBRAHIMOVIC** (Ger)	(18)	11.12.05
36	Luca **MAZZITELLI**	(28)	15.11.95
45	Enzo **BARRENECHEA** (Arg)	(22)	22.05.01

FORWARDS

7	Jaime **BAEZ** (Uru)	(28)	25.04.95
8	Demba **SECK** (Sen)	(23)	10.02.01
9	**KAIO JORGE** (Bra)	(22)	24.01.02
10	Giuseppe **CASO**	(25)	09.12.98
11	Marvin **CUNI** (Alb)	(22)	10.07.01
17	Giorgi **KVERNADZE** (Geo)	(21)	07.02.03
18	Matias **SOULE** (Arg)	(20)	15.04.03
26	Soufiane **BIDAOUI** (Mar)	(33)	20.04.90
29	Fares **GHEDJEMIS** (Fra)	(21)	06.09.02
70	Walid **CHEDDIRA** (Mar)	(26)	22.01.98

COACH

Eusebio **DI FRANCESCO**	(54)	08.09.69

GENOA

GOALKEEPERS

1	Josep **MARTINEZ** (Spa)	(25)	27.05.98
16	Nicola **LEALI**	(31)	17.02.93
38	Simone **CALVANI**	(18)	16.05.05
39	Daniele **SOMMARIVA**	(26)	18.07.97
99	Franz **STOLZ** (Aut)	(23)	14.02.01

DEFENDERS

3	Aaron **MARTIN** (Spa)	(26)	22.04.97
4	Koni **DE WINTER** (Bel)	(21)	12.06.02
13	Mattia **BANI**	(30)	10.12.93
14	Alessandro **VOGLIACCO**	(25)	14.09.98
20	Stefano **SABELLI**	(31)	13.01.93
22	Johan **VASQUEZ** (Mex)	(25)	22.10.98
23	Giorgio **CITTADINI**	(21)	18.04.02
33	Alan **MATTURRO** (Uru)	(19)	11.10.04
53	Tommaso **PITTINO**	(19)	14.01.05
55	Ridgeciano **HAPS** (Sur)	(30)	12.06.93
90	Djed **SPENCE** (Eng)	(23)	09.08.00

MIDFIELDERS

2	Morten **THORSBY** (Nor)	(27)	05.05.96
5	Emil **BOHINEN** (Nor)	(25)	12.03.99
8	Kevin **STROOTMAN** (Ned)	(34)	13.02.90
17	Ruslan **MALINOVSKYI** (Ukr)	(30)	04.05.93
32	Morten **FRENDRUP** (Den)	(23)	07.04.01
41	Christos **PAPADOPOULOS** (Gre)	(19)	01.11.04
43	Riccardo **ARBOSCELLO**	(18)	10.12.05
47	Milan **BADELJ** (Cro)	(35)	25.02.89

FORWARDS

9	**VITINHA** (Por)	(24)	15.03.00
10	Junior **MESSIAS** (Bra)	(32)	13.05.91
11	Albert **GUDMUNDSSON** (Isl)	(26)	15.06.97
18	Caleb **EKUBAN** (Gha)	(30)	23.03.94
19	Mateo **RETEGUI**	(24)	29.04.99
30	David **ANKEYE** (Nga)	(21)	22.05.02
42	Yoan **BORNOSUZOV** (Bul)	(20)	09.01.04

COACH

Alberto **GILARDINO**	(41)	05.07.82

INTERNAZIONALE

GOALKEEPERS

1	Yann **SOMMER** (Sui)	(35)	17.12.88
12	Raffaele **DI GENNARO**	(30)	03.10.93
40	Alessandro **CALLIGARIS**	(19)	07.03.05
77	Emil **AUDERO**	(27)	18.01.97

DEFENDERS

2	Denzel **DUMFRIES** (Ned)	(27)	18.04.96
6	Stefan **DE VRIJ** (Ned)	(32)	05.02.92
7	Juan **CUADRADO** (Col)	(35)	26.05.88
15	Francesco **ACERBI**	(36)	10.02.88
28	Benjamin **PAVARD** (Fra)	(28)	28.03.96
30	**CARLOS AUGUSTO** (Bra)	(25)	07.01.99
31	Yann **BISSECK** (Ger)	(23)	29.11.00
32	Federico **DIMARCO**	(26)	10.11.97
36	Matteo **DARMIAN**	(34)	02.12.89
43	Matteo **MOTTA**	(19)	10.02.05
44	Giacomo **STABILE**	(19)	12.04.05
95	Alessandro **BASTONI**	(24)	13.04.99

MIDFIELDERS

5	Stefano **SENSI**	(28)	05.08.95
14	Davy **KLAASSEN** (Ned)	(31)	21.02.93
16	Davide **FRATTESI**	(24)	22.09.99
20	Hakan **CALHANOGLU** (Tur)	(30)	08.02.94
21	Kristjan **ASLLANI** (Alb)	(22)	09.03.02
22	Henrikh **MKHITARYAN** (Arm)	(35)	21.01.89
23	Nicolo **BARELLA**	(27)	07.02.97
41	Ebenezer **AKINSANMIRO** (Nga)	(19)	25.11.04
47	Issiaka **KAMATE** (Fra)	(19)	02.08.04
50	Aleksandar **STANKOVIC** (Srb)	(18)	03.08.05

FORWARDS

8	Marko **ARNAUTOVIC** (Aut)	(34)	19.04.89
9	Marcus **THURAM** (Fra)	(26)	06.08.97
10	Lautaro **MARTINEZ** (Arg)	(26)	22.08.97
17	Tajon **BUCHANAN** (Can)	(25)	08.02.99
49	Amadou **SARR** (Sen)	(19)	28.06.04
70	Alexis **SANCHEZ** (Chi)	(35)	19.12.88

COACH

Simone **INZAGHI**	(48)	05.04.76

JUVENTUS

GOALKEEPERS

1	Wojciech **SZCZESNY** (Pol)	(33)	18.04.90
23	Carlo **PINSOGLIO**	(34)	16.03.90
36	Mattia **PERIN**	(31)	10.11.92
38	Giovanni **DAFFARA**	(19)	05.12.04
42	Giovanni **GAROFANI**	(21)	20.10.02
49	Simone **SCAGLIA**	(19)	12.07.04

DEFENDERS

2	Mattia **DE SCIGLIO**	(31)	20.10.92
3	**BREMER** (Bra)	(27)	18.03.97
4	Federico **GATTI**	(25)	24.06.98
6	**DANILO** (Bra)	(32)	15.07.91
12	**ALEX SANDRO** (Bra)	(33)	26.01.91
24	Daniele **RUGANI**	(29)	29.07.94
27	Andrea **CAMBIASO**	(24)	20.02.00
33	Tiago **DJALO** (Por)	(24)	09.04.00
44	Tarik **MUHAREMOVIC** (Bih)	(21)	28.02.03

MIDFIELDERS

5	Manuel **LOCATELLI**	(26)	08.01.98
10	Paul **POGBA** (Fra)	(31)	15.03.93
11	Filip **KOSTIC** (Srb)	(31)	01.11.92
15	Kenan **YILDIZ** (Tur)	(18)	04.05.05
16	Weston **McKENNIE** (USA)	(25)	28.08.98
20	Fabio **MIRETTI**	(20)	03.08.03
21	Nicolo **FAGIOLI**	(23)	12.02.01
25	Adrien **RABIOT** (Fra)	(29)	03.04.95
26	Carlos **ALCARAZ** (Arg)	(21)	30.11.02
41	Hans Nicolussi **CAVIGLIA**	(23)	18.06.00
47	Joseph **NONGE** (Bel)	(18)	15.05.05
50	Luis **HASA**	(20)	06.01.04

FORWARDS

7	Federico **CHIESA**	(26)	25.10.97
9	Dusan **VLAHOVIC** (Srb)	(24)	28.01.00
14	Arkadiusz **MILIK** (Pol)	(30)	28.02.94
17	Samuel **ILING-JUNIOR** (Eng)	(20)	04.10.03
18	Moise **KEAN**	(24)	28.02.00
22	Timothy **WEAH** (USA)	(24)	22.02.00
40	Tommaso **MANCINI**	(19)	23.07.04
99	Leonardo **CERRI**	(21)	04.03.03

COACH

Massimiliano **ALLEGRI**	(56)	11.08.67

LAZIO

GOALKEEPERS

33	Luigi **SEPE**	(32)	08.05.91
35	Christos **MANDAS** (Gre)	(22)	17.09.01
53	Federico **MAGRO**	(19)	10.01.05
59	Davide **RENZETTI**	(17)	09.06.06
94	Ivan **PROVEDEL**	(30)	17.03.94

DEFENDERS

3	Luca **PELLEGRINI**	(25)	07.03.99
4	**PATRIC** (Spa)	(30)	17.04.93
13	Alessio **ROMAGNOLI**	(29)	12.01.95
15	Nicolo **CASALE**	(26)	14.02.98
23	Elseid **HYSAJ** (Alb)	(30)	02.02.94
34	Mario **GILA** (Spa)	(23)	29.08.00
46	Fabio **RUGGERI**	(19)	13.12.04
52	Matteo **DUTU** (Rou)	(18)	23.11.05
77	Adam **MARUSIC** (Mne)	(31)	17.10.92

MIDFIELDERS

5	Matias **VECINO** (Uru)	(32)	24.08.91
6	Daichi **KAMADA** (Jap)	(27)	05.08.96
8	Matteo **GUENDOUZI** (Fra)	(24)	14.04.99
10	**LUIS ALBERTO** (Spa)	(31)	28.09.92
28	**ANDRE ANDERSON**	(24)	23.09.99
29	Manuel **LAZZARI**	(30)	29.11.93
32	Danilo **CATALDI**	(29)	06.08.94
56	Luca **NAPOLITANO**	(20)	10.01.04
65	Nicolo **ROVELLA**	(22)	04.12.01
68	Larsson **COULIBALY** (Civ)	(20)	17.04.03

FORWARDS

7	**FELIPE ANDERSON** (Bra)	(30)	15.04.93
9	**PEDRO** (Spa)	(36)	28.07.87
17	Ciro **IMMOBILE**	(34)	20.02.90
18	Gustav **ISAKSEN** (Den)	(22)	19.04.01
19	Taty **CASTELLANOS** (Arg)	(25)	03.10.98
20	Mattia **ZACCAGNI**	(28)	16.06.95
22	Diego **GONZALEZ** (Par)	(21)	07.01.03
70	Sana **FERNANDES** (Por)	(18)	10.03.06
87	Cristiano **LOMBARDI**	(28)	19.08.95

COACH

Igor **TUDOR** (Cro)	(45)	16.04.78

LECCE

GOALKEEPERS

21	Federico **BRANCOLINI**	(22) 14.07.01
30	Wladimiro **FALCONE**	(29) 12.04.95
40	Jasper **SAMOOJA** (Fin)	(20) 21.07.03
98	Alexandru **BORBEI** (Rou)	(20) 27.06.03

DEFENDERS

5	Marin **PONGRACIC** (Cro)	(26) 11.09.97
6	Federico **BASCHIROTTO**	(27) 20.09.96
12	Lorenzo **VENUTI**	(29) 12.04.95
13	Patrick **DORGU** (Den)	(19) 26.10.04
17	Valentin **GENDREY** (Fra)	(23) 21.06.00
23	Sebastian **ESPOSITO** (Aus)	(18) 21.04.05
25	Antonino **GALLO**	(24) 05.01.00
55	Kastriot **DERMAKU** (Alb)	(32) 15.01.92
59	Ahmed **TOUBA** (Alg)	(26) 13.03.98
83	Daniel **SAMEK** (Cze)	(20) 19.02.04

MIDFIELDERS

8	Hamza **RAFIA** (Fra)	(25) 02.04.99
16	Joan **GONZALEZ** (Spa)	(22) 01.02.02
18	Medon **BERISHA** (Alb)	(20) 21.10.03
20	Ylber **RAMADANI** (Alb)	(28) 12.04.96
29	Alexis **BLIN** (Fra)	(27) 16.09.96
77	Mohamed **KABA** (Fra)	(22) 27.10.01

FORWARDS

7	Pontus **ALMQVIST** (Swe)	(24) 10.07.99
9	Nikola **KRSTOVIC** (Mne)	(24) 05.04.00
10	Remi **OUDIN** (Fra)	(27) 18.11.96
11	Nicola **SANSONE**	(32) 10.09.91
22	Lameck **BANDA** (Zam)	(23) 29.01.01
24	Jeppe **CORFITZEN** (Den)	(19) 29.12.04
45	Rares **BURNETE** (Rou)	(20) 31.01.04
50	Santiago **PIEROTTI** (Arg)	(23) 03.04.01
91	Roberto **PICCOLI**	(23) 27.01.01

COACH

	Luca **GOTTI**	(56) 13.09.67

MILAN

GOALKEEPERS

16	Mike **MAIGNAN** (Fra)	(28) 03.07.95
57	Marco **SPORTIELLO**	(31) 10.05.92
69	Lapo **NAVA**	(20) 22.01.04
78	Andrea **BARTOCCIONI**	(20) 14.03.04
83	Antonio **MIRANTE**	(40) 08.07.83

DEFENDERS

2	Davide **CALABRIA**	(27) 06.12.96
19	Theo **HERNANDEZ** (Fra)	(26) 06.10.97
20	Pierre **KALULU** (Fra)	(23) 05.06.00
23	Fikayo **TOMORI** (Eng)	(26) 19.12.97
24	Simon **KJAER** (Den)	(35) 26.03.89
28	Malick **THIAW** (Ger)	(22) 08.08.01
30	Mattia **CALDARA**	(29) 05.05.94
38	Filippo **TERRACCIANO**	(21) 08.02.03
42	Alessandro **FLORENZI**	(33) 11.03.91
46	Matteo **GABBIA**	(24) 21.10.99
74	Alex **JIMENEZ** (Spa)	(18) 08.05.05
82	Jan-Carlo **SIMIC** (Ger)	(18) 02.05.05
84	Clinton **NSIALA-MAKENGO** (Fra)	(20) 17.01.04
93	Andrei **COUBIS** (Rou)	(20) 29.09.03
95	Davide **BARTESAGHI**	(18) 29.12.05

MIDFIELDERS

4	Ismael **BENNACER** (Alg)	(26) 01.12.97
7	Yacine **ADLI** (Fra)	(23) 29.07.00
8	Ruben **LOFTUS-CHEEK** (Eng)	(28) 23.01.96
14	Tijjani **REIJNDERS** (Ned)	(25) 29.07.98
32	Tommaso **POBEGA**	(24) 15.07.99
80	Yunus **MUSAH** (USA)	(21) 29.11.02
81	Victor **ELETU** (Nga)	(19) 01.04.05
85	Kevin **ZEROLI**	(19) 11.01.05

FORWARDS

9	Olivier **GIROUD** (Fra)	(37) 30.09.86
10	Rafael **LEAO** (Por)	(24) 10.06.99
11	Christian **PULISIC** (USA)	(25) 18.09.98
15	Luka **JOVIC** (Srb)	(26) 23.12.97
17	Noah **OKAFOR** (Sui)	(23) 24.05.00
21	Samuel **CHUKWUEZE** (Nga)	(24) 22.05.99
73	Francesco **CAMARDA**	(16) 10.03.08

COACH

	Stefano **PIOLI**	(58) 20.10.65

MONZA

GOALKEEPERS

16	Michele **DI GREGORIO**	(26) 27.07.97
23	Alessandro **SORRENTINO**	(22) 03.04.02
62	Andrea **MAZZA**	(20) 01.01.04
66	Stefano **GORI**	(28) 09.03.96

DEFENDERS

2	Giulio **DONATI**	(34) 05.02.90
4	Armando **IZZO**	(32) 02.03.92
5	Luca **CALDIROLA**	(33) 01.02.91
13	Pedro **PEREIRA** (Por)	(26) 22.01.98
18	Davide **BETTELLA**	(24) 07.04.00
19	Samuele **BIRINDELLI**	(24) 19.07.99
22	Pablo **MARI** (Spa)	(30) 31.08.93
33	Danilo **D'AMBROSIO**	(35) 09.09.88
44	Andrea **CARBONI**	(23) 04.02.01
77	Giorgos **KYRIAKOPOULOS** (Gre)	(28) 05.02.96

MIDFIELDERS

6	Roberto **GAGLIARDINI**	(30) 07.04.94
7	Jose Machin **PEPIN** (Eqg)	(27) 14.08.96
8	Jean-Daniel **AKPA AKPRO** (Civ)	(31) 11.10.92
21	Valentin **CARBONI** (Arg)	(19) 05.03.05
28	Andrea **COLPANI**	(24) 11.05.99
32	Matteo **PESSINA**	(26) 21.04.97
38	Warren **BONDO** (Fra)	(20) 15.09.03
60	Leonardo **COLOMBO**	(18) 04.06.05
61	Andrea **FERRARIS**	(21) 22.02.03

FORWARDS

9	Lorenzo **COLOMBO**	(22) 08.03.02
10	Gianluca **CAPRARI**	(30) 30.07.93
11	Milan **DJURIC** (Bih)	(33) 22.05.90
17	Papu **GOMEZ** (Arg)	(36) 15.02.88
20	Alessio **ZERBIN**	(25) 03.03.99
27	Daniel **MALDINI**	(22) 11.10.01
47	Dany **MOTA** (Por)	(25) 02.05.98
79	Matija **POPOVIC** (Srb)	(18) 08.01.06
80	Samuele **VIGNATO**	(20) 24.02.04
84	Patrick **CIURRIA**	(29) 09.02.95

COACH

	Raffaele **PALLADINO**	(39) 17.04.84

NAPOLI

GOALKEEPERS

1	Alex **MERET**	(27) 22.03.97
14	Nikita **CONTINI**	(27) 21.05.96
16	Hubert **IDASIAK** (Pol)	(22) 03.02.02
95	Pierluigi **GOLLINI**	(29) 18.03.95

DEFENDERS

3	**NATAN** (Bra)	(23) 06.02.01
5	**JUAN JESUS** (Bra)	(32) 10.06.91
6	**MARIO RUI** (Por)	(32) 27.05.91
13	Amir **RRAHMANI** (Kos)	(30) 24.02.94
17	Mathias **OLIVERA** (Uru)	(26) 31.10.97
22	Giovanni **DI LORENZO**	(30) 04.08.93
30	Pasquale **MAZZOCCHI**	(28) 27.07.95
50	Luigi **D'AVINO**	(18) 08.12.05
55	Leo **OSTIGARD** (Nor)	(24) 28.11.99

MIDFIELDERS

4	Diego **DEMME** (Ger)	(32) 21.11.91
8	Hamed **TRAORE** (Civ)	(24) 16.02.00
20	Piotr **ZIELINSKI** (Pol)	(29) 20.05.94
24	Jens **CAJUSTE** (Swe)	(24) 10.08.99
29	Jesper **LINDSTROM** (Den)	(24) 29.02.00
32	Leander **DENDONCKER** (Bel)	(28) 15.04.95
38	Lorenzo **RUSSO**	(18) 19.04.05
60	Francesco **GIOIELLI**	(20) 26.02.04
68	Stanislav **LOBOTKA** (Svk)	(29) 25.11.94
99	Andre-Frank **ZAMBO ANGUISSA** (Cmr)	(28) 16.11.95

FORWARDS

9	Victor **OSIMHEN** (Nga)	(25) 29.12.98
18	Giovanni **SIMEONE** (Arg)	(28) 05.07.95
21	Matteo **POLITANO**	(30) 03.08.93
26	Cyril **NGONGE** (Bel)	(23) 26.05.00
77	Khvicha **KVARATSKHELIA** (Geo)	(23) 12.02.01
81	Giacomo **RASPADORI**	(24) 18.02.00

COACH

	Francesco **CALZONA**	(55) 24.10.68

ROMA

GOALKEEPERS

1	Rui **PATRICIO** (Por)	(36) 15.02.88
63	Pietro **BOER**	(21) 12.05.02
99	Mile **SVILAR** (Srb)	(24) 27.08.99

DEFENDERS

2	Rick **KARSDORP** (Ned)	(29) 11.02.95
3	Dean **HUIJSEN** (Ned)	(18) 14.04.05
5	Evan **NDICKA** (Civ)	(24) 20.08.99
6	Chris **SMALLING** (Eng)	(34) 22.11.89
14	Diego **LLORENTE** (Spa)	(30) 16.08.93
19	Zeki **CELIK** (Tur)	(27) 17.02.97
23	Gianluca **MANCINI**	(27) 17.04.96
37	Leonardo **SPINAZZOLA**	(31) 25.03.93
43	Rasmus **KRISTENSEN** (Den)	(26) 11.07.97
69	**ANGELINO** (Spa)	(27) 04.01.97
72	Lovro **GOLIC** (Svn)	(18) 05.03.06
74	Jan **OLIVERAS** (Spa)	(19) 07.07.04

MIDFIELDERS

4	Bryan **CRISTANTE**	(29) 03.03.95
7	Lorenzo **PELLEGRINI**	(27) 19.06.96
16	Leandro **PAREDES** (Arg)	(29) 29.06.94
20	Renato **SANCHES** (Por)	(26) 18.08.97
22	Houssem **AOUAR** (Alg)	(25) 30.06.98
35	Tommaso **BALDANZI**	(21) 23.03.03
52	Edoardo **BOVE**	(21) 16.05.02
59	Nicola **ZALEWSKI** (Pol)	(22) 23.01.02
60	Riccardo **PAGANO**	(19) 28.11.04
61	Niccolo **PISILLI**	(19) 23.09.04
65	Martin **VETKAL** (Est)	(20) 21.02.04
66	Mattia **MANNINI**	(17) 08.07.06
68	Francesco **D'ALESSIO**	(20) 21.02.04

FORWARDS

9	Tammy **ABRAHAM** (Eng)	(26) 02.10.97
17	Sardar **AZMOUN** (Irn)	(29) 01.01.95
21	Paulo **DYBALA** (Arg)	(30) 15.11.93
62	Filippo **ALESSIO**	(19) 24.12.04
64	Luigi **CHERUBINI**	(20) 15.01.04
67	Joao **COSTA** (Por)	(19) 28.03.05
90	Romelu **LUKAKU** (Bel)	(30) 13.05.93
92	Stephan **EL SHAARAWY**	(31) 27.10.92

COACH

	Daniele **DE ROSSI**	(40) 24.07.83

SALERNITANA

GOALKEEPERS

1	Vincenzo **FIORILLO**	(34) 13.01.90
13	Guillermo **OCHOA** (Mex)	(38) 13.07.85
56	Benoit **COSTIL** (Fra)	(36) 03.07.87
62	Pasquale **ALLOCCA**	(18) 09.05.05
65	Gregorio **SALVATI**	(19) 07.02.05

DEFENDERS

3	Domagoj **BRADARIC** (Cro)	(24) 10.12.99
4	Triantafyllos **PASALIDIS** (Gre)	(27) 19.07.96
5	Jerome **BOATENG** (Ger)	(35) 03.09.88
6	Junior **SAMBIA** (Fra)	(27) 07.09.96
17	Federico **FAZIO** (Arg)	(37) 17.03.87
23	Norbert **GYOMBER** (Svk)	(31) 03.07.92
24	Marco **PELLEGRINO** (Arg)	(21) 18.07.02
27	Niccolo **PIEROZZI**	(22) 12.09.01
40	Emanuele **ELIA**	(19) 19.12.04
41	Tommaso **FERRARI**	(18) 30.04.05
44	Kostas **MANOLAS** (Gre)	(32) 14.06.91
59	Alessandro **ZANOLI**	(23) 03.10.00
98	Lorenzo **PIROLA**	(22) 20.02.02

MIDFIELDERS

7	Agustin **MARTEGANI** (Arg)	(23) 20.05.00
11	Iron **GOMIS** (Fra)	(24) 08.11.99
18	Lassana **COULIBALY** (Mli)	(28) 10.04.96
20	Grigoris **KASTANOS** (Cyp)	(26) 30.01.98
25	Giulio **MAGGIORE**	(26) 12.03.98
26	Toma **BASIC** (Cro)	(27) 25.11.96
51	Ciro **BORRELLI**	(18) 09.01.06
87	Antonio **CANDREVA**	(37) 28.02.87
99	Mateusz **LEGOWSKI** (Pol)	(21) 29.01.03

FORWARDS

9	**SIMY** Nwankwo (Nga)	(31) 07.05.92
10	Boulaye **DIA** (Sen)	(27) 16.11.96
14	Shon **WEISSMAN** (Isr)	(28) 14.02.96
22	Chukwubuikem **IKWUEMESI** (Nga)	(22) 05.08.01
33	Loum **TCHAOUNA** (Fra)	(20) 08.09.03
36	Andres **SFAIT** (Rou)	(19) 09.12.04
55	Emanuel **VIGNATO**	(23) 24.08.00

COACH

	Stefano **COLANTUONO**	(61) 23.10.62

SASSUOLO

GOALKEEPERS

25	Gianluca **PEGOLO**	(43) 25.03.81
28	Alessio **CRAGNO**	(29) 28.06.94
33	Daniel **THEINER**	(20) 25.02.04
34	Alessandro **SCACCHETTI**	(19) 22.02.05
47	Andrea **CONSIGLI**	(37) 27.01.87

DEFENDERS

2	Filippo **MISSORI**	(20) 24.03.04
3	Marcus **PEDERSEN** (Nor)	(23) 16.07.00
5	Martin **ERLIC** (Cro)	(26) 24.01.98
13	Gian Marco **FERRARI**	(31) 15.05.92
19	Marash **KUMBULLA** (Alb)	(24) 08.02.00
21	Mattia **VITI**	(22) 24.01.02
22	Jeremy **TOLJAN** (Ger)	(29) 08.08.94
29	Matteo **FALASCA**	(19) 27.04.04
30	Seb **LOEFFEN** (Ned)	(20) 18.01.04
43	Josh **DOIG** (Sco)	(21) 18.05.02
44	**RUAN** (Bra)	(24) 07.06.99

MIDFIELDERS

6	Uros **RACIC** (Srb)	(26) 17.03.98
7	**MATHEUS HENRIQUE** (Bra)	(26) 19.12.97
11	Nedim **BAJRAMI** (Alb)	(25) 28.02.99
14	Pedro **OBIANG** (Eqg)	(32) 27.03.92
23	Cristian **VOLPATO**	(20) 15.11.03
24	Daniel **BOLOCA** (Rou)	(25) 22.12.98
35	Luca **LIPANI**	(18) 18.05.05
36	Justin **KUMI**	(19) 16.07.04
42	Kristian **THORSTVEDT** (Nor)	(25) 13.03.99

FORWARDS

8	Samuele **MULATTIERI**	(23) 07.10.00
9	Andrea **PINAMONTI**	(24) 19.05.99
10	Domenico **BERARDI**	(29) 01.08.94
15	Emil **CEIDE** (Nor)	(22) 03.09.01
20	Samu **CASTILLEJO** (Spa)	(29) 18.01.95
45	Armand **LAURIENTE** (Fra)	(25) 04.12.98
92	Gregoire **DEFREL** (Mtq)	(32) 17.06.91

COACH

	Davide **BALLARDINI**	(60) 06.01.64

TORINO

GOALKEEPERS

1	Luca **GEMELLO**	(23) 03.07.00
22	Matteo **BREZZO**	(18) 13.06.05
32	Vanja **MILINKOVIC-SAVIC** (Srb)	(27) 20.02.97
65	Pietro **PASSADOR**	(21) 26.02.03
71	Mihai **POPA** (Rou)	(23) 12.10.00

DEFENDERS

3	Perr **SCHUURS** (Ned)	(24) 26.11.99
4	Alessandro **BUONGIORNO**	(24) 06.06.99
5	Adam **MASINA** (Mar)	(30) 02.01.94
6	Matteo **LOVATO**	(24) 14.02.00
13	Ricardo **RODRIGUEZ** (Sui)	(31) 25.08.92
15	Saba **SAZONOV** (Geo)	(22) 01.02.02
19	Raoul **BELLANOVA**	(23) 17.05.00
20	Valentino **LAZARO** (Aut)	(28) 24.03.96
25	Alessandro **DELLAVALLE**	(19) 11.05.04
26	Koffi **DJIDJI** (Civ)	(31) 30.11.92
27	Mergim **VOJVODA** (Kos)	(29) 01.02.95
47	Vimoj Muntu **WA MUNGU** (Fra)	(19) 15.10.04

MIDFIELDERS

8	Ivan **ILIC** (Srb)	(23) 17.03.01
16	Nikola **VLASIC** (Cro)	(26) 04.10.97
28	Samuele **RICCI**	(22) 21.08.01
61	Adrien **TAMEZE** (Fra)	(30) 04.02.94
66	Gvidas **GINEITIS** (Ltu)	(19) 15.04.04
77	Karol **LINETTY** (Pol)	(29) 02.02.95
80	Come **BIANAY** (Fra)	(18) 13.05.05
81	Aaron **CIAMMAGLICHELLA**	(19) 26.01.05
84	Jacopo **ANTOLINI**	(20) 10.01.04

FORWARDS

9	Antonio **SANABRIA** (Par)	(28) 04.03.96
11	Pietro **PELLEGRI**	(23) 17.03.01
17	Uros **KABIC** (Srb)	(20) 01.01.04
21	David **OKEREKE** (Nga)	(26) 29.08.97
29	Alieu **NJIE** (Swe)	(18) 14.05.05
79	Zanos **SAVVA** (Cyp)	(18) 26.11.05
91	Duvan **ZAPATA** (Col)	(33) 01.04.91

COACH

	Ivan **JURIC** (Cro)	(48) 25.08.75

UDINESE

GOALKEEPERS

1	Marco **SILVESTRI**	(33) 02.03.91
40	Maduka **OKOYE** (Nga)	(24) 28.08.99
70	Federico **MOSCA**	(18) 08.08.05
72	Joel **MALUSA**	(17) 28.03.07
93	Daniele **PADELLI**	(38) 25.10.85

DEFENDERS

2	Festy **EBOSELE** (Irl)	(21) 02.08.02
12	Hassane **KAMARA** (Civ)	(30) 05.03.94
13	Joao **FERREIRA** (Por)	(23) 22.03.01
14	James **ABANKWAH** (Irl)	(20) 16.01.04
16	Antonio **TIKVIC** (Cro)	(19) 21.04.04
18	Nehuen **PEREZ** (Arg)	(23) 24.06.00
19	Kingsley **EHIZIBUE** (Ned)	(28) 25.05.95
23	Enzo **EBOSSE** (Cmr)	(25) 11.03.99
27	Christian **KABASELE** (Bel)	(33) 24.02.91
29	Jaka **BIJOL** (Svn)	(25) 05.02.99
30	Lautaro **GIANETTI** (Arg)	(30) 13.11.93
31	Thomas **KRISTENSEN** (Den)	(22) 17.01.02
33	Jordan **ZEMURA** (Zim)	(24) 14.11.99
83	Samuel John **NWACHUKWU**	(18) 04.11.05

MIDFIELDERS

4	Sandi **LOVRIC** (Svn)	(26) 28.03.98
6	Oier **ZARRAGA** (Spa)	(25) 04.01.99
11	**WALACE** (Bra)	(29) 04.04.95
24	Lazar **SAMARDZIC** (Srb)	(22) 24.02.02
26	Florian **THAUVIN** (Fra)	(31) 26.01.93
32	Martin **PAYERO** (Arg)	(25) 11.09.98
37	Roberto **PEREYRA** (Arg)	(33) 07.01.91
71	Bor **ZUNEC** (Svn)	(18) 30.06.05
79	David **PEJICIC** (Svn)	(16) 14.06.07

FORWARDS

7	Isaac **SUCCESS** (Nga)	(28) 07.01.96
9	Keinan **DAVIS** (Eng)	(26) 13.02.98
10	Gerard **DEULOFEU** (Spa)	(30) 13.03.94
17	Lorenzo **LUCCA**	(23) 10.09.00
22	**BRENNER** (Bra)	(24) 16.01.00

COACH

	Gabriele **CIOFFI**	(48) 07.09.75

VERONA

GOALKEEPERS

1	Lorenzo **MONTIPO**	(28) 20.02.96
16	Mattia **CHIESA**	(23) 16.07.00
22	Alessandro **BERARDI**	(33) 16.01.91
34	Simone **PERILLI**	(29) 07.01.95

DEFENDERS

18	Fabien **CENTONZE** (Fra)	(28) 16.01.96
19	Ruben **VINAGRE** (Por)	(25) 09.04.99
23	Giangiacomo **MAGNANI**	(28) 04.10.95
27	Pawel **DAWIDOWICZ** (Pol)	(28) 20.05.95
32	Juan **CABAL** (Col)	(23) 08.01.01
42	Diego **COPPOLA**	(20) 28.12.03

MIDFIELDERS

6	Reda **BELAHYANE** (Fra)	(19) 01.06.04
8	Darko **LAZOVIC** (Srb)	(33) 15.09.90
10	Stefan **MITROVIC** (Srb)	(21) 15.08.02
14	**JOSELITO** (Spa)	(20) 09.02.04
21	Dani **SILVA** (Por)	(24) 11.04.00
25	Suat **SERDAR** (Ger)	(27) 11.04.97
28	Nicola **PATANE**	(20) 25.03.04
31	Tomas **SUSLOV** (Svk)	(21) 07.06.02
33	Ondrej **DUDA** (Svk)	(29) 05.12.94
75	Nicolo **CALABRESE**	(19) 16.11.04
90	Michael **FOLORUNSHO**	(26) 07.02.98

FORWARDS

7	Elayis **TAVSAN** (Ned)	(22) 30.04.01
9	Thomas **HENRY** (Fra)	(29) 20.09.94
11	Karol **SWIDERSKI** (Pol)	(27) 23.01.97
13	Juan Manuel **CRUZ** (Arg)	(24) 19.07.99
17	Tijjani **NOSLIN** (Ned)	(24) 07.07.99
37	**CHARLYS** (Bra)	(20) 19.02.04
38	Jackson **TCHATCHOUA** (Bel)	(22) 14.09.01
80	Alphadjo **CISSE**	(17) 22.10.06
99	Federico **BONAZZOLI**	(26) 21.05.97

COACH

	Marco **BARONI**	(60) 11.09.63

(Ages as of 12.04.24)

Internationals

EURO 2024 PLAY-OFFS

Path A

Semi-Finals

Mar 21 – Cardiff
Wales 4 (Brooks 3, Williams 38, Johnson 47, D. James 86)
Finland 1 (Pukki 45)
Wales: Ward – Mepham, Rodon, B. Davies – Roberts, J. James, Ampadu, Williams; Brooks (Moore 61), Wilson (Broadhead 90); Johnson (D. James 73).
Finland: Hradecky – Alho (Niskanan 87), Tenho, Ivanov, Peltola; Lod (Antman 73), Schuller (Kairinen 73), Kamara, Hakans; Pohjanpalo (Kallman 78), Pukki (F. Jensen 78).

Mar 21 – Warsaw
Poland 5 (Frankowski 22, Zielinksi 50, Piotrowski 70, Mets 73 og, S. Szymanski 76)
Estonia 1 (Vetkal 78)
Poland: Szczesny – Bednarek, Dawidowicz, Kiwior; Frankowski (Cash 46, Puchacz 56), Zielinski (S. Szymanski 72), Slisz, Piotrowski (Moder 73), Zalewski; Swiderski (Buksa 72), Lewandowski.
Estonia: Hein – Paskotsi, J. Tamm, Klavan, Mets, Kallaste (Pikk 67); Palumets (Poom 67), Vetkal, Soomets (Ainsalu 82); A. Tamm (Hussar 31), Jurgens (Lepik 67).
Sent off: Paskotsi 27.

Final

Mar 26 – Cardiff
Wales 0
Poland 0
After Extra-Time. Poland win 5-4 on penalties
Wales: Ward – Mepham, Rodon, B. Davies – Roberts (Brooks 84, Broadhead 112), J. James, Ampadu, Williams; Wilson, Johnson (D. James 70); Moore.
Sent off: Mepham120+1.
Poland: Szczesny – Bednarek (Salamon 80), Dawidowicz, Kiwior; Frankowski, Piotrowski (Romanczuk 105), Slisz, Zielinski (S. Szymanski 101), Zalewski; Swiderski (Piatek 80), Lewandowski.

Path B

Semi-Finals

Mar 21 – Zenica
Bosnia & Herzegovina 1 (Matviyenko 56 og)
Ukraine 2 (Yaremchuk 85, Dovbyk 88)
Bosnia & Herzegovina: Sehic – Ahmedhodzic (Kovacevic 82), Hadzikadunic, Kolasinac; Dedic (Civic 68), Cimirot, Krunic (Rahmanovic 90+2), Gazibegovic; Hajradinovic (Pjanic 82); Dzeko, Demirovic.
Ukraine: Lunin – Konoplya, Zabarnyi, Matviyenko, Mykolenko; Zinchenko (Malinovskyi 76), Brazhko (Yaremchuk 81); Zubkov (Hutsulyak 76), Sudakov, Mudryk; Dovbyk (Talovyerov 90+2).

Mar 21 – Budapest
Israel 1 (Zahavi 31 pen)
Iceland 4 (A. Gudmundsson 39, 83, 87, Traustason 42)
Israel: Glazer – Dasa, Vitor, Goldberg, Revivo; Kanichowsky (Gloukh 46), Dor Peretz (Abu Fani 70), Kinda (Safouri 62); Khalaili (Abada 71), Zahavi, Turgeman.
Sent off: Revivo 73.
Iceland: Valdimarsson – Palsson, Ingason, Gretarsson, Thorarinsson; Willumsson (Thorsteinsson 46), Traustason (Bergmann Johannesson 62), Haraldsson, A. Sigurdsson (Anderson 77); Oskarsson (Gudjohnsen 62), Gudmundsson.

Final

Mar 26 – Wroclaw
Ukraine 2 (Tsyhankov 54, Mudryk 84)
Iceland 1 (A. Gudmundsson 30)
Ukraine: Lunin – Konoplya, Zabarnyi, Matviyenko, Mykolenko; Malinovskyi (Zinchenko 64), Brazhko, Sudakov; Tsyhankov (Talovyerov 88), Yaremchuk (Dovbyk 72), Mudryk.
Iceland: Valdimarsson – Palsson, Ingason, Gretarsson, Thorarinsson (Finnsson 63); Haraldsson (Anderson 87), Traustason, J. Gudmundsson, Thorsteinsson (Ellertsson 87); Gudjohnsen (Oskarsson 64), A. Gudmundsson.

Path C

Semi-Finals

Mar 21 – Tbilisi
Georgia 2 (Zivzivadze 40, 63)
Luxembourg 0
Georgia: Mamardashvili – Kakabadze, Kvirkvelia, Kashia, Dvali, Shengelia (Tsitaishvili 72); Chakvetadze (Kvekveskiri 77), Kochorashvili (Kankava 86), Kiteishvili; Zivzivadze (Kvilitaia 86), Mikautadze (Davitashvili 77).
Luxembourg: Moris – Jans, Mahmutovic (Muratovic 90+1), Chanot, Pinto (M. Martins 42); Bohnert, Barreiro, C. Martins, Olesen (O. Thill 77), Borges Sanches (Curci 77); Rodrigues (Korac 90+1).
Sent off: Chanot 56.

Mar 21 – Athens
Greece 5 (Bakasetas 9 pen, Pelkas 15, Ioannidis 37, Kourbellis 40, Tapalov 86 og)
Kazakhstan 0
Greece: Vlachodimos – Baldock (Rota 67), Mavropanos, Hatzidiakos (Retsos 46), Tsimikas; Bakasetas (Bouchalakis 74), Kourbellis, Mantalos; Masouras, Ioannidis (Konstantelias 64), Pelkas (Giakoumakis 64).
Kazakhstan: Shatskiy – Kairov (Tapalov 46), Bystrov, Marochkin, Erlanov, Vorogovskiy; Chesnokov (Zuev 68), Beisebekov (Sadybekov 46), Zaynutdinov, Astanov (Orazov 46); Samorodov (Aymbetov 77).

Final

Mar 26 – Tbilisi
Georgia 0
Greece 0
After Extra-Time. Georgia win 4-2 on penalties
Georgia: Mamardashvili – Kvirkvelia, Kashia, Dvali; Kiteishvili (Kvekveskiri 104); Kakabadze, Kochorashvili, Chakvetadze (Davitashvili 104), Shengelia (Tsitaishvili 86); Zivzivadze (Mikautadze 74), Kvaratskhelia (Kvilitaia 109).
Greece: Vlachodimos – Baldock (Rota 60), Mavropanos, Hatzidiakos (Retsos 105), Tsimikas; Kourbellis (Siopis 67), Mantalos (Bouchalakis 99); Masouras, Bakasetas, Pelkas (Konstantelias 61); Ioannidis (Giakoumakis 90).

Finals Draw

Group A
Germany, Scotland, Hungary, Switzerland

Group B
Spain, Croatia, Italy, Albania

Group C
Slovenia, Denmark, Serbia, England

Group D
Poland, Netherlands, Austria, France

Group E
Belgium, Slovakia, Romania, Ukraine

Group F
Turkey, Georgia, Portugal, Czech Republic

Euro 2024 kicks off on June 14

2022-23 UEFA NATIONS LEAGUE

Relegation Play-Outs

Mar 21 – Faro
Gibraltar 0
Lithuania 1 (Kucys 60)

Mar 26 – Kaunas
Lithuania 1 (Cernych 50)
Gibraltar 0
Lithuania win 2-0 on aggregate and remain in League C – Gibraltar are relegated to League D

2026 WORLD CUP QUALIFIERS

ASIA Section

● *8 direct slots available, plus 1 play-off slot*

Second Round

Group A

Mar 21 – Khamis Mushait
Afghanistan 0
India 0

Mar 21 – Doha
Qatar 3 (Afif 47, 68, Al Rawi 51)
Kuwait 0

Mar 26 – Guwahati
India 1 (Chhetri 38 pen)
Afghanistan 2 (Akbari 70, Mukhammad 88 pen)

Mar 26 – Farwaniya
Kuwait 1 (Daham 79)
Qatar 2 (Almoez 77, 80)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Qatar	4	4	0	0	16	3	12
India	4	1	1	2	2	5	4
Afghanistan	4	1	1	2	3	13	4
Kuwait	4	1	0	3	5	6	3

Group B

Mar 21 – Yangon
Myanmar 1 (Soe Moe Kyaw 35)
Syria 1 (Al Dali 71)

Mar 21 – Tokyo
Japan 1 (Tanaka 2)
North Korea 0

Mar 26 – Dammam
Syria 7 (Khrbin 30, 54, 63 pen, Hesar 47, Al Ajaan 51, 68, Al Dali 80)
Myanmar 0

Mar 26 – Pyongyang
North Korea –
Japan –
Match cancelled and will not be rescheduled

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Japan	3	3	0	0	11	0	9
Syria	4	2	1	1	9	6	7
North Korea	3	1	0	2	6	3	3
Myanmar	4	0	1	3	2	19	1

Group C

Mar 21 – Seoul
South Korea 1 (Son Heung-min 42)
Thailand 1 (Suphanat 61)

Mar 21 – Singapore
Singapore 2 (Faris 53, Mahler 81)
China 2 (Wu Lei 10, 45+2)

Mar 26 – Tianjin
China 4 (Wu Lei 21, 85, Fei Nanduo 65 pen, Wei Shihao 90)
Singapore 1 (Faris 22)

Mar 26 – Bangkok
Thailand 0
South Korea 3 (Lee Jae-sung 19, Son Heung-min 54, Park Jin-seop 82)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
South Korea	4	3	1	0	12	1	10
China	4	2	1	1	8	7	7
Thailand	4	1	1	2	5	7	4
Singapore	4	0	1	3	4	14	1

Group D

Mar 21 – Kaohsiung
Chinese Taipei 0
Kyrgyzstan 2 (Kichin 54 pen, Merk 80)

Mar 21 – Muscat
Oman 2 (Al Sabhi 58, Al Ghassani 88)
Malaysia 0

Mar 26 – Bishkek
Kyrgyzstan 5 (Kojo 17, 38, 45, Brauzman 79, Ki. Merk 90+5)
Chinese Taipei 1 (Wu Yen-shu 87 pen)

Mar 26 – Kuala Lumpur
Malaysia 0
Oman 2 (Al Malki 45+4 pen, Al Ghafri 90+4)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Kyrgyzstan	4	3	0	1	11	5	9
Oman	4	3	0	1	7	1	9
Malaysia	4	2	0	2	5	7	6
Chinese Taipei	4	0	0	4	1	11	0

Group E

Mar 21 – Tehran
Iran 5 (Kanaani 10, 48, Azmoun 13, Mohebi 56, Noorafkan 90+2)
Turkmenistan 0

Mar 21 – Hong Kong
Hong Kong 0
Uzbekistan 2 (Shomurodov 49, Ashurmatov 66)

Mar 26 – Tashkent
Uzbekistan 3 (Shomurodov 20, Erkinov 63, Urunov 70)
Hong Kong 0

Mar 26 – Ashgabat
Turkmenistan 0
Iran 1 (Ghayedi 45+5)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Iran	4	3	1	0	12	2	10
Uzbekistan	4	3	1	0	10	3	10
Turkmenistan	4	0	1	3	3	11	1
Hong Kong	4	0	1	3	2	11	1

Group F

Mar 21 – Jakarta
Indonesia 1 (Egy 52)
Vietnam 0

Mar 21 – Basra
Iraq 1 (M. Ali 84)
Philippines 0

Mar 26 – Hanoi
Vietnam 0
Indonesia 3 (Idzes 9, Oratmangoen 23, Sananta 90+8)

Mar 26 – Manila
Philippines 0
Iraq 5 (Hussein 14, 36, Al Ammari 30, Iqbal 62, Tahseen 77)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Iraq	4	4	0	0	12	1	12
Indonesia	4	2	1	1	6	6	7
Vietnam	4	1	0	3	2	5	3
Philippines	4	0	1	3	1	9	1

Group G

Mar 21 – Islamabad
Pakistan 0
Jordan 3 (Al Tamari 2, 86, Olwan 9 pen)

Mar 21 – Riyadh
Saudi Arabia 1 (S. Al Dawsari 23)
Tajikistan 0

Mar 26 – Amman
Jordan 7 (Al Tamari 15, 62, 79, Al Naimat 28, Al Rosan 52, Olwan 75, Abu Zraiq 83)
Pakistan 0

Mar 26 – Dushanbe
Tajikistan 1 (Soirov 80)
Saudi Arabia 1 (Al Buraikan 46)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Saudi Arabia	4	3	1	0	8	1	10
Jordan	4	2	1	1	11	3	7
Tajikistan	4	1	2	1	8	4	5
Pakistan	4	0	0	4	1	20	0

Group H

Mar 21 – Riffa
Nepal 0
Bahrain 5 (Al Humaidan 2, Baqer 4, Madan 45+4, Al Khattal 87, Abdullatif 90+6)

Mar 21 – Abu Dhabi
United Arab Emirates 2 (Saleh 24 pen, Adil 72)
Yemen 1 (Idrees 69 og)

Mar 26 – Riffa
Bahrain 3 (Baqer 7, Helal 18, Al Aswad 36)
Nepal 0

Mar 26 – Khobar
Yemen 0
United Arab Emirates 3 (Lima 14, 22, Adil 35)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
UAE	4	4	0	0	11	1	12
Bahrain	4	3	0	1	10	2	9
Yemen	4	1	0	3	3	7	3
Nepal	4	0	0	4	0	14	0

Group I

Mar 21 – Sydney
Australia 2 (Baccus 5, Rowles 54)
Lebanon 0

Mar 21 – Kuwait City
Palestine 5 (Dabbagh 43, 53, 77, Qunbar 45+1, 49)
Bangladesh 0

Mar 26 – Canberra
Lebanon 0
Australia 5 (Yengi 2, Jradi 47 og, Goodwin 48, 81, Iredale 68)

Mar 26 – Dhaka
Bangladesh 0
Palestine 1 (Termanini 90+4)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Australia	4	4	0	0	15	0	12
Palestine	4	2	1	1	6	2	7
Lebanon	4	0	2	2	1	8	2
Bangladesh	4	0	1	3	1	14	1

CONCACAF Section

● *3 direct slots available, plus 2 play-off slots (along with 3 host nations)*

First Round – 1st Leg

Mar 22 – Upper Bethlehem
US Virgin Islands 1 (Blaschka 73)
British Virgin Islands 1 (Liziario 90+2)

Mar 22 – The Valley
Anguilla 0
Turks & Caicos 0

First Round – 2nd Leg

Mar 26 – Providenciales
Turks & Caicos 1 (Forbes 23)
Anguilla 1 (Paris 45+3 pen)
After Extra-Time. 1-1 on aggregate
Anguilla win 4-3 on penalties

Mar 26 – Road Town
British Virgin Islands 0
US Virgin Islands 0
After Extra-Time. 1-1 on aggregate
British Virgin Islands win 4-2 on penalties

Second Round Draw

Group A
Honduras, Antigua & Barbuda, Cuba, Bermuda, Cayman Islands

Group B
Costa Rica, Trinidad & Tobago, St Kitts & Nevis, Grenada, Bahamas

Group C
Haiti, Curacao, St Lucia, Barbados, Aruba

Group D
Panama, Nicaragua, Guyana, Montserrat, Belize

Group E
Jamaica, Guatemala, Dominican Republic, Dominica, British Virgin Islands

Group F
El Salvador, Suriname, Puerto Rico, St Vincent & Grenadines, Anguilla

Second round kicks off June 2024

2023-24 CONCACAF NATIONS LEAGUE FINALS

Semi-Finals

Mar 21 – Arlington
United States 3 (Burke 90+6 og, Wright 96, 109)
Jamaica 1 (Leigh 1)
After Extra-Time
United States: Turner – Scally (Reyna 46), M. Robinson, Richards, A. Robinson; Tillman (B. Aaronson), Musah (Adams 63, Cardoso 100), McKennie; Weah (Wright 63), Balogun (Pepi 63), Pulisic.
Jamaica: Blake – Bernard, Hector, Latibeaudiere; Lembikisa, Palmer (Anderson 74), D. Lowe, Leigh (Dixon 102); Decordova-Reid (T. Gray 90+2), Cephas (Burke 73, Williams 102); J. Lowe (Johnson 65).

Mar 21 – Arlington
Panama 0
Mexico 3 (Alvarez 40, Quinones 43, Pineda 67)
Panama: Mosquera – Escobar, Cordoba (Lenis 79), Andrade; Blackman (Anderson 77), Godoy (Martinez 68), Carrasquilla, Barcenas (Davis 17); Fajardo, Rodriguez; Diaz (Waterman 68).
Mexico: Ochoa – Araujo (Aguirre 59), Montes, Vasquez (Orozco 80), Gallardo; E. Sanchez (Pineda 59), Alvarez (Romo 77), Chavez; Antuna, Martin, Quinones (Lozano 59).

Third Place Play-Off

Mar 24 – Arlington
Panama 0
Jamaica 1 (Lembikisa 41)
Panama: Mosquera – Ramos, Cordoba, Miller (Ayarza 68), Andrade; Anderson, Godoy (Martinez 68), Carrasquilla, Rodriguez (Diaz 78); Fajardo (Lenis 78), Waterman (Stephens 86).
Jamaica: Blake – Bernard, Hector, Latibeaudiere; Lembikisa, Palmer (Anderson 81), D. Lowe (King 89), Leigh (T. Gray 90+1); Decordova-Reid, Nicholson, D. Gray (Cephas 81).

Final

Mar 24 – Arlington
Mexico 0
United States 2 (Adams 45, Reyna 63)
Mexico: Ochoa – J. Sanchez, Montes, Vasquez, Gallardo (Arteaga 90+2); Chavez (Romo 80), Alvarez, E. Sanchez (Pineda 65); Antuna (Gimenez 65), Martin, Lozano.
United States: Turner – Dest, Richards, Ream, A. Robinson; McKennie, Adams (Cardoso 46), Reyna (Musah 79); Weah (Tillman 90+3), Wright (Balogun 66), Pulisic (B. Aaronson 90+3).

2024 COPA AMERICA PLAY-OFFS

Mar 23 – Frisco
Canada 2 (Larin 61, Shaffelburg 90+1)
Trinidad & Tobago 0
Canada: Crepeau – Johnston, Waterman, Miller; Buchanan (Choiniere 81), Eustaquio (Piette 90+4), Kone (De Fougerolles 90+4), Davies; Larin (Russell-Rowe 80, David, Ugbo (Shaffelburg 70).
Trinidad & Tobago: Smith – Gomez (Auvray 81), Jones, David, J. Garcia, Raymond; Rampersad (Moore 56), Hackshaw (Powder 71), Phillips; L. Garcia, Fortune (Gill 81).

Mar 23 – Frisco
Costa Rica 3 (Galo 12, Madrigal 56, Brenes 62)
Honduras 1 (Chirinos 10)
Costa Rica: Navas – Taylor (Quiros 69), Cascante, Arboine, Calvo, Mora (J. Varga 90+2); Madrigal (K. Vargas 87), Galo, Brenes, Zamora (Campbell 69); Ugalde (Contreras 87).
Honduras: Rougier – Najar, Santos, Vega, Decas; Flores, Alvarez (Ruiz 65); Rodriguez, Rivas (Vuelto 83), Chirinos (Martinez 83); Bengtson (Rochez 64).

Finals Draw

Group A
Argentina, Peru, Chile, Canada

Group B
Mexico, Ecuador, Venezuela, Jamaica

Group C
United States, Uruguay, Panama, Bolivia

Group D
Brazil, Colombia, Paraguay, Costa Rica

2024 Copa America kicks off on June 20

2024 OFC NATIONS CUP QUALIFIERS

Preliminary Group

Mar 20 – Nuku'alofa
Tonga 1 (Kite 90+5)
Samoa 4 (Tumua 11 pen, Viliamu 45+1, 60, Stowers 90)

Mar 23 – Nuku'alofa
Samoa 1 (Taualai 89)
Cook Islands 0

Mar 26 – Nuku'alofa
Cook Islands 1 (Saghabi 38)
Tonga 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Samoa (Q)	2	2	0	0	5	1	6
Cook Islands	2	1	0	0	1	1	3
Tonga	2	0	0	1	1	5	0

Finals Draw

Group A
New Zealand, New Caledonia, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu

Group B
Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Tahiti, Samoa

2024 OFC Nations Cup kicks off on June 15

2025 AFCON QUALIFIERS

Preliminary Round – 1st Leg

Mar 20 – El Jadida
Somalia 0
Eswatini 3 (Figuareido 33, Ndzinisa 45+4, Thwala 56)

Mar 20 – Marrakesh
Djibouti 0
Liberia 2 (Sangare 23 pen, Dorley 35)

Mar 22 – Yaounde
Chad 1 (Mouandilmadji 90+3)
Mauritius 0

Mar 22 – Berkane
Sao Tome & Principe 1 (Leal 50)
South Sudan 1 (Dhata 78)

Preliminary Round – 2nd Leg

Mar 26 – Mbombela
Eswatini 2 (Ndzinisa 46, Matsebula 49)
Somalia 2 (Awad 76, Ahmed 86)
Eswatini win 5-2 on aggregate

Mar 26 – Monrovia
Liberia 0
Djibouti 0
Liberia win 2-0 on aggregate

Mar 26 – Saint Pierre
Mauritius 1 (Villeneuve 45)
Chad 2 (Tchouplaou 74, Hassan 90+10)
Chad win 3-1 on aggregate

Mar 26 – Berkane
South Sudan 0
Sao Tome & Principe 0
1-1 on aggregate. South Sudan win on away goals

FRIENDLIES

Feb 3 – San Jose
Costa Rica 2 (Daly 20, Suarez 70)
El Salvador 0

Mar 1 – Port of Spain
Trinidad & Tobago 0
Jamaica 1 (Dixon 58)

Mar 3 – Arima
Trinidad & Tobago 0
Jamaica 0

Mar 14 – Dubai
Kazakhstan 2 (Chesnokov 2, Zuev 47)
Turkmenistan 0

Mar 18 – Honiara
Solomon Islands 2 (Molea 77, Hou 90+5)
Fiji 1 (Raheem 14)

Mar 20 – Serravalle
San Marino 1 (Berardi 21 pen)
St Kitts & Nevis 3 (Terrell 31, Burley 45, Panayiotou 49)

Mar 21 – Jeddah
Cape Verde 1 (R. Mendes 2)
Guyana 0

Mar 21 – Moscow
Russia 4 (An. Miranchuk 21 pen, Osipenko 32, Al. Miranchuk 55, Sergeev 90+1)
Serbia 0

Mar 21 – Ta'Qali
Malta 2 (Guillaumier 54, Pisani 58)
Slovenia 2 (Sporar 28, Sesko 81)

Mar 21 – Jeddah
Guinea 6 (Sylla 9 pen, 63, Diawara 10, Camara 19, Kane 40 pen, 56)
Vanuatu 0

Mar 21 – Guimaraes
Portugal 5 (Leao 24, Nunes 33, Fernandes 45, Bruma 57, Ramos 61)
Sweden 2 (Gyokeres 58, Nilsson 90)

Mar 21 – Larnaca
Cyprus 1 (Pittas 34)
Latvia 1 (Ciganiks 85)

Mar 21 – Honiara
Solomon Islands 0
Fiji 2 (Raheem 45+2, Krishna 65)

Mar 21 – Annaba
Andorra 1 (Cucu 5)
South Africa 1 (Mokwana 25)

Mar 21 – Addis Abeba
Ethiopia 1 (Tafesse 48)
Lesotho 2 (Thabantso 34, Moerane 43)

Mar 21 – Fort Lauderdale
Italy 2 (Retegui 40, 80)
Venezuela 1 (Machis 43)

Mar 21 – Antalya
Belarus 0
Montenegro 2 (Marusic 27, Krstovic 45)

Mar 22 – Antananarivo
Botswana 0
Rwanda 0

Mar 22 – Casablanca
Burkina Faso 1 (Bouda 37)
Libya 2 (Al Badri 35, Al Khouja 50)

Mar 22 – Cairo
Egypt 1 (Mohamed 29 pen)
New Zealand 0

Mar 22 – Antananarivo
Madagascar 1 (Tendry 17)
Burundi 0

Mar 22 – Harrison
Ecuador 2 (Yeboah 8, Plata 86)
Guatemala 0

Mar 22 – Baku
Tanzania 0
Bulgaria 1 (Despodov 52)

Mar 22 – Colombo
Central African Republic 6 (Toropite 16, Baboula 48, 90+3, Namnganda 49, 64, Dangabo 56)
Bhutan 0

Mar 22 – Marrakesh
Nigeria 2 (Dessers 38 pen, Lookman 84)
Ghana 1 (J. Ayew 90+5 pen)

Mar 22 – Belmopan
Belize 1 (Bernardez 6)
Puerto Rico 1 (Rios 20)

Mar 22 – Colombo
Papua New Guinea 0
Sri Lanka 0

Mar 22 – Antalya
North Macedonia 1 (Miovski 45+1)
Moldova 1 (Damascan 82)

Mar 22 – Yerevan
Armenia 0
Kosovo 1 (Rashica 25)

Mar 22 – Baku
Azerbaijan 1 (Mustafazade 90+1)
Mongolia 0

Mar 22 – Marbella
Liechtenstein 0
Faroe Islands 4 (Petersen 3, 45+1, Justinussen 49, Svensson 90+2)

Mar 22 – Santiago
Dominican Republic 2 (Sambataro 61, Japa 84)
Aruba 0

Mar 22 – Oslo
Norway 1 (Bobb 20)
Czech Republic 2 (Zima 36, Barak 85)

Mar 22 – Agadir
Morocco 1 (Carmo 72 og)
Angola 0

Mar 22 – Jeddah
Bermuda 2 (Todd 81, Parfitt-Williams 87)
Brunei 0

Mar 22 – Jeddah
Equatorial Guinea 2 (Joanet 10, Socoliche 36)
Cambodia 0

Mar 22 – Amiens
Senegal 3 (Appindangoy 12 og, Faye 44, Mane 90+2)
Gabon 0

Mar 22 – Amsterdam
Netherlands 4 (Reijnders 40, Wijnaldum 72, Weghorst 84, Malen 86)
Scotland 0

Mar 22 – Bucharest
Romania 1 (Man 23)
Northern Ireland 1 (Reid 7)

Mar 22 – Budapest
Hungary 1 (Szoboszlai 48 pen)
Turkey 0

Mar 22 – Mohammedia
Niger 1 (Sosah 55)
Togo 2 (Dermane 58, 64)

Mar 22 – Marrakesh
Comoros 4 (Said 7, 56, Selemani 8, 66)
Uganda 0

Mar 22 – Parma
Albania 0
Chile 3 (Vargas 19, Bolados 83, Davila 90+2)

Mar 22 – London
Spain 0
Colombia 1 (Munoz 61)

Mar 22 – Marrakesh
Mali 2 (Sagnan 9, Toure 12)
Mauritania 0

Mar 22 – Baraki
Algeria 3 (Gouiri 43, Benzia 79, Mandi 90+4)
Bolivia 2 (Algaranaz 47, Sagredo 70)

Mar 22 – Philadelphia
Argentina 3 (Romero 16, Fernandez 42, Lo Celso 52)
El Salvador 0

Mar 22 – Lima
Peru 2 (Grimaldo 2, Lapadula 13)
Nicaragua 0

Mar 23 – Lilongwe
Zambia 2 (Sunzu 5, Chama 24)
Zimbabwe 2 (Bonne 32, Musona 45+2)
Zimbabwe win 6-5 on penalties

World Service

Mar 23 – Bratislava
Slovakia 0
Austria 2 (Baumgartner 1, Weimann 82)

Mar 23 – Lilongwe
Malawi 0
Kenya 4 (Olunga 1, 5 pen, Masika 83, Avire 90+3)

Mar 23 – Amiens
Ivory Coast 2 (Gradel 29, Diakite 69)
Benin 2 (Olaitan 8, 51)

Mar 23 – Dublin
Republic of Ireland 0
Belgium 0

Mar 23 – Cairo
Tunisia 0
Croatia 0
Croatia win 5-4 on penalties

Mar 23 – Wembley
England 0
Brazil 1 (Endrick 80)

Mar 23 – Copenhagen
Denmark 0
Switzerland 0

Mar 23 – Lyon
France 0
Germany 2 (Wirtz 1, Havertz 49)

Mar 24 – Harrison
Ecuador 0
Italy 2 (Pellegrini 3, Barella 90+4)

Mar 24 – Addis Abeba
Ethiopia 2 (Gugsa 51, Markneh 61)
Lesotho 1 (Fothoane 32)

Mar 24 – Almere
Suriname 1 (Lonwijk 36)
Martinique 1 (Labeau 12)

Mar 24 – Houston
Guatemala 0
Venezuela 0

Mar 24 – Serravalle
San Marino 0
St Kitts & Nevis 0

Mar 24 – Belmopan
Belize 3 (Salazar 43, Moss 55, Martinez 74)
Puerto Rico 0

Mar 25 – Antananarivo
Burundi 0
Botswana 0

Mar 25 – Antananarivo
Madagascar 0
Rwanda 2 (Mugisha 27, Bizimana 90+1)

Mar 25 – Baku
Tanzania 3 (John 49, Sopu 62, Miroshi 76)
Mongolia 0

Mar 25 – Colombo
Central African Republic 4 (Yawanendji-Malipangou 11, Godame 26, 45, 79)
Papua New Guinea 0

Mar 25 – Baku
Azerbaijan 1 (Qurbanli 87)
Bulgaria 1 (Krastev 59)

Mar 25 – Colombo
Sri Lanka 2 (De Silva 46, Kelaart 54)
Bhutan 0

Mar 25 – Jeddah
Guinea 5 (Sylla 11, Bangoura 48, Diawara 53, J. Keita 61, Kane 70)
Bermuda 1 (Leverock 15)

Mar 25 – Larnaca
Cyprus 0
Serbia 1 (S. Milinkovic-Savic 7)

Mar 25 – Jeddah
Cape Verde 1 (J. Cabral 64)
Equatorial Guinea 0

Mar 25 – Chambly
Gabon 1 (Meye 39)
Congo 1 (Bassouamina 73)

Mar 25 – Marrakesh
Comoros 0
Angola 0

Mar 25 – Solna
Sweden 1 (Nilsson 62)
Albania 0

Mar 25 – Antalya
Montenegro 1 (Jovetic 45)
North Macedonia 0

Mar 25 – Annaba
Bolivia 1 (R. Vaca 13)
Andorra 0

Mar 26 – Lilongwe
Malawi 1 (Chaziya 23)
Zambia 2 (Chama 17, Daka 18)

Mar 26 – Lilongwe
Kenya 3 (Olunga 45+1, 63, 87)
Zimbabwe 1 (Okumu 4 og)

Mar 26 – Berrechid
Burkina Faso 1 (Djiga 30)
Niger 1 (Sosah 53)

Mar 26 – Marrakesh
Uganda 2 (Mukwala 23 pen, Shaban 82)
Ghana 2 (Opoku 7, J. Ayew 28 pen)

Mar 26 – Oslo
Norway 1 (Sorloth 18)
Slovakia 1 (Duda 87)

Mar 26 – Larnaca
Latvia 1 (Krollis 11)
Liechtenstein 1 (Oss 1 og)

Mar 26 – Budapest
Hungary 2 (Szoboszlai 58, Z. Nagy 86)
Kosovo 0

Mar 26 – Antalya
Cayman Islands 0
Moldova 4 (Damascan 28, Ionita 31, Nicolaescu 52, Bogaciuc 90+3)

Mar 26 – Prague
Czech Republic 2 (Krejci 45+1, Chory 77)
Armenia 1 (Sevikyan 14)

Mar 26 – Helsinki
Finland 2 (F. Jensen 30, Hein 38 og)
Estonia 1 (A. Tamm 62)

Mar 26 – Luxembourg
Luxembourg 2 (Rodrigues 24, Sinani 45)
Kazakhstan 1 (Sadybekov 2)

Mar 26 – Brondby
Denmark 2 (Hojbjerg 8, Daramy 52)
Faroe Islands 0

Mar 26 – Ta'Qali
Malta 0
Belarus 0

Mar 26 – Madrid
Colombia 3 (Cordoba 6, J. Arias 35, Asprilla 79)
Romania 2 (Hagi 84, Tanase 90+3)

Mar 26 – Lens
Ivory Coast 2 (Olivera 9 og, Doue 84)
Uruguay 1 (Vinas 77)

Mar 26 – Jeddah
Guyana 4 (Glasgow 20, 59 pen, Lovell 80, Khedoo 90+1)
Cambodia 1 (Chanthea 53)

Mar 26 – Amiens
Senegal 1 (Mane 59 pen)
Benin 0

Mar 26 – Wembley
England 2 (Toney 17 pen, Bellingham 90+5)
Belgium 2 (Tielemans 11, 36)

Mar 26 – Frankfurt
Germany 2 (Mittelstadt 11, Fullkrug 85)
Netherlands 1 (Veerman 4)

Mar 26 – Glasgow
Scotland 0
Northern Ireland 1 (Bradley 32)

Mar 26 – Dublin
Republic of Ireland 0
Switzerland 1 (Shaqiri 23)

Mar 26 – Ljubljana
Slovenia 2 (Cerin 72, Elsnik 80)
Portugal 0

Mar 26 – Vienna
Austria 6 (Schlager 2, Gregoritsch 44, 48, 59 pen, Baumgartner 78 pen, Entrup 90+5)
Turkey 1 (Calhanoglu 25 pen)

Mar 26 – Marseille
France 3 (Fofana 18, Kolo Muani 25, Giroud 72)
Chile 2 (Nunez 6, Osorio 82)

Mar 26 – Marrakesh
Mali 2 (Toure 18, Doumbia 87)
Nigeria 0

Mar 26 – Cairo
New Zealand 0
Tunisia 0
Tunisia win 4-2 on penalties

Mar 26 – Cairo
Egypt 2 (Rabia 6, Abdelmonem 90+4)
Croatia 4 (Vlasic 21, Petkovic 57, Kramaric 77, Majer 86)

Mar 26 – Madrid
Spain 3 (Rodri 12 pen, 87 pen, Olmo 36)
Brazil 3 (Rodrygo 40, Endrick 50, Paqueta 90+6 pen)

Mar 26 – Jeddah
Vanuatu 2 (Kalo 37, Iawak 70)
Brunei 3 (Shariff 52, Othman 72, Hakeme 90+2)

Mar 26 – Baraki
Algeria 3 (Benzia 22, 70, Brahimi 53)
South Africa 3 (Zwane 34, 45+5, Rayners 66)

Mar 26 – Agadir
Morocco 0
Mauritania 0

Mar 26 – Houston
El Salvador 1 (Gil 11)
Honduras 1 (Rochez 62)

Mar 26 – Lima
Peru 4 (Pena 18, Castillo 45+1, Quispe 54, Guerrero 90+4 pen)
Dominican Republic 1 (J. Lopez 58)

Mar 26 – Los Angeles
Argentina 3 (Di Maria 52, Mac Allister 56, L. Martinez 77)
Costa Rica 1 (Ugalde 34)

Mar 26 – Casablanca
Togo 1 (Tchakei 39)
Libya 1 (Krawa'a 37)

Mar 26 – Managua
Nicaragua 0
Cuba 1 (Reyes 81)

Club football
EUROPE

2023-24 UEFA CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Last 16 – 2nd Leg

Mar 5 – Munich
B. Munich (Ger) 3 (Kane 38, 66, Muller 45+2)
Lazio (Ita) 0
Bayern Munich win 3-1 on aggregate

Mar 5 – San Sebastian
Real Sociedad (Spa) 1 (Merino 89)
Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) 2 (K. Mbappe 15, 56)
Paris Saint-Germain win 4-1 on aggregate

Mar 6 – Manchester
Man City (Eng) 3 (Akanji 5, Alvarez 9, Haaland 45+3)
FC Copenhagen (Den) 1 (Elyounoussi 29)
Manchester City win 6-2 on aggregate

Mar 6 – Madrid
Real Madrid (Spa) 1 (Vinicius Junior 65)
RB Leipzig (Ger) 1 (Orban 68)
Real Madrid win 2-1 on aggregate

Mar 12 – Barcelona
Barcelona (Spa) 3 (Fermin 15, Cancelo 17, Lewandowski 83)
Napoli (Ita) 1 (Rrahmani 30)
Barcelona win 4-2 on aggregate

Mar 12 – London
Arsenal (Eng) 1 (Trossard 41)
Porto (Por) 0
After Extra-Time. 1-1 on aggregate
Arsenal win 4-2 on penalties

Mar 13 – Madrid
Atletico Madrid (Spa) 2 (Griezmann 35, Depay 87)
Internazionale (Ita) 1 (Dimarco 33)
After Extra-Time. 2-2 on aggregate
Atletico Madrid win 3-2 on penalties

Mar 13 – Dortmund
B. Dortmund (Ger) 2 (Sancho 3, Reus 90+5)
PSV (Ned) 0
Borussia Dortmund win 3-1 on aggregate

Quarter-Final Draw

Arsenal (Eng) v Bayern Munich (Ger);
Atletico Madrid (Spa) v Borussia Dortmund (Ger);
Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) v Barcelona (Spa);
Real Madrid (Spa) v Manchester City (Eng)
Teams drawn first will play the first leg at home

Semi-Final Draw

Atletico Madrid (Spa) or Borussia Dortmund (Ger) v Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) or Barcelona (Spa); Arsenal (Eng) or Bayern Munich (Ger) v Real Madrid (Spa) or Manchester City (Eng)
Teams drawn first will play the first leg at home

2023-24 UEFA EUROPA LEAGUE

Last 16 – 1st Leg

Mar 6 – Lisbon
Sporting (Por) 1 (Paulinho 17)
Atalanta (Ita) 1 (Scamacca 39)

Mar 7 – Prague
Sparta Prague (Cze) 1 (Bradley 46 og)
Liverpool (Eng) 5 (Mac Allister 6 pen, Nunez 25, 45+3, Diaz 53, Szoboszlai 90+4)

Mar 7 – Marseille
Marseille (Fra) 4 (Veretout 23, Mosquera 28 og, Aubameyang 42 pen, 59)
Villarreal (Spa) 0

Mar 7 – Rome
Roma (Ita) 4 (Dybala 13, Lukaku 43, Mancini 64, Cristante 68)
Brighton & Hove Albion (Eng) 0

Mar 7 – Lisbon
Benfica (Por) 2 (Di Maria 45+2 pen, Goldson 67 og)
Rangers (Sco) 2 (Lawrence 7, Sterling 45+5)

Mar 7 – Freiburg
Freiburg (Ger) 1 (Gregoritsch 81)
West Ham United (Eng) 0

Mar 7 – Milan
Milan (Ita) 4 (Giroud 34, Reijnders 44, Loftus-Cheek 45+1, Pulisic 85)
Slavia Prague (Cze) 2 (Doudera 36, Schranz 65)

Mar 7 – Baku
Qarabag (Aze) 2 (Benzia 26, Juninho 45+2)
Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) 2 (Wirtz 70, Schick 90+2)

Last 16 – 2nd Leg

Mar 14 – Bergamo
Atalanta (Ita) 2 (Lookman 46, Scamacca 59)
Sporting (Por) 1 (Pedro Goncalves 33)
Atalanta win 3-2 on aggregate

Mar 14 – Liverpool
Liverpool (Eng) 6 (Nunez 7, Clark 8, Salah 10, Gakpo 14, 55, Szoboszlai 48)
Sparta Prague (Cze) 1 (Birmancevic 42)
Liverpool win 11-2 on aggregate

Mar 14 – Villarreal
Villarreal (Spa) 3 (Capoue 32, Sorloth 54, Mosquera 86)
Marseille (Fra) 1 (Clauss 90+4)
Marseille win 5-3 on aggregate

Mar 14 – Brighton
Brighton & Hove Albion (Eng) 1 (Welbeck 37)
Roma (Ita) 0
Roma win 4-1 on aggregate

Mar 14 – Glasgow
Rangers (Sco) 0
Benfica (Por) 1 (Rafa Silva 66)
Benfica win 3-2 on aggregate

Mar 14 – London
West Ham United (Eng) 5 (Paqueta 9, Bowen 32, Cresswell 52, Kudus 77, 85)
Freiburg (Ger) 0
West Ham United win 5-1 on aggregate

Mar 14 – Prague
Slavia Prague (Cze) 1 (Jurasek 84)
Milan (Ita) 3 (Pulisic 33, Loftus-Cheek 36, Leao 45+6)
Milan win 7-3 on aggregate

Mar 14 – Leverkusen
Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) 3 (Frimpong 72, Schick 90+3, 90+8)
Qarabag (Aze) 2 (Zoubir 58, Juninho 67)
Bayer Leverkusen win 5-4 on aggregate

Quarter-Final Draw

Milan (Ita) v Roma (Ita);
Liverpool (Eng) v Atalanta (Ita);
Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) v West Ham United (Eng);
Benfica (Por) v Marseille (Fra)
Teams drawn first will play the first leg at home

Semi-Final Draw

Benfica (Por) or Marseille (Fra) v Liverpool (Eng) or Atalanta (Ita); Milan (Ita) or Roma (Ita) v Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) or West Ham United (Eng)
Teams drawn first will play the first leg at home

2023-24 UEFA EUROPA CONFERENCE LEAGUE

Last 16 – 1st Leg

Mar 6 – Geneva
Servette (Sui) 0
Viktoria Plzen (Cze) 0

Mar 7 – Amsterdam
Ajax (Ned) 0
Aston Villa (Eng) 0

Mar 7 – Molde
Molde (Nor) 2 (Stenevik 43, Gulbrandsen 90+2)
Club Brugge (Bel) 1 (De Cuyper 85 pen)

Mar 7 – Brussels
Union Saint-Gilloise (Bel) 0
Fenerbahce (Tur) 3 (Batshuayi 20, Oosterwolde 84, Tadic 90+4 pen)

Mar 7 – Zagreb
Dinamo Zagreb (Cro) 2 (Petkovic 37, 71)
PAOK (Gre) 0

Mar 7 – Graz
Sturm Graz (Aut) 0
Lille (Fra) 3 (David 28, 51, Zhegrova 71)

Mar 7 – Budapest
Maccabi Haifa (Isr) 3 (Seck 12, Kinda 29, Khalaili 67)
Fiorentina (Ita) 4 (Nzola 2, Beltran 58, Mandragora 73, Barak 90+5)

Mar 7 – Piraeus
Olympiakos (Gre) 1 (El Kaabi 13)
Maccabi Tel Aviv (Isr) 4 (Zahavi 4, 30, Shahar 9, Peretz 74)

Last 16 – 2nd Leg

Mar 14 – Plzen
Viktoria Plzen (Cze) 0
Servette (Sui) 0
After Extra-Time. 0-0 on aggregate
Viktoria Plzen win 3-1 on penalties

Mar 14 – Birmingham
Aston Villa (Eng) 4 (Watkins 25, Bailey 60, Duran 75, Diaby 81)
Ajax (Ned) 0
Aston Villa win 4-0 on aggregate

Mar 14 – Brugge
Club Brugge (Bel) 3 (Skov Olsen 45+1, 48, Skoras 70)
Molde (Nor) 0
Club Brugge win 4-2 on aggregate

Mar 14 – Istanbul
Fenerbahce (Tur) 0
Union Saint-Gilloise (Bel) 1 (Rasmussen 68)
Fenerbahce win 3-1 on aggregate

Mar 14 – Thessaloniki
PAOK (Gre) 5 (Rahman 27, Sucic 33 og, Thomas 42, Koulierakis 72, A. Zivkovic 88 pen)
Dinamo Zagreb (Cro) 1 (Hoxha 49)
PAOK win 5-3 on aggregate

Mar 14 – Lille
Lille (Fra) 1 (Santos 43)
Sturm Graz (Aut) 1 (Biereth 45+1)
Lille win 4-1 on aggregate

Mar 14 – Florence
Fiorentina (Ita) 1 (Barak 59)
Maccabi Haifa (Isr) 1 (Khalaily 88)
Fiorentina win 5-4 on aggregate

Mar 14 – Backa Topola
Maccabi Tel Aviv (Isr) 1 (Zahavi 57 pen)
Olympiakos (Gre) 6 (Podence 10, Fortounis 36, El Kaabi 45+3, 65, Jovetic 93, El-Arabi 103)
After Extra-Time. Olympiakos win 7-5 on aggregate

Quarter-Final Draw

Club Brugge (Bel) v PAOK (Gre);
Olympiakos (Gre) v Fenerbahce (Tur);
Aston Villa (Eng) v Lille (Fra);
Viktoria Plzen (Cze) v Fiorentina (Ita)
Teams drawn first will play the first leg at home

Semi-Final Draw

Aston Villa (Eng) or Lille (Fra) v Olympiakos (Gre) or Fenerbahce (Tur); Viktoria Plzen (Cze) or Fiorentina (Ita) v Club Brugge (Bel) or PAOK (Gre)
Teams drawn first will play the first leg at home

SOUTH AMERICA

2024 COPA LIBERTADORES

Third Round Qualifiers – 1st Leg

Mar 5 – Asuncion
Nacional (Par) 0
Palestino (Chi) 2 (Carrasco 47, Sosa 50)

Mar 6 – Rio deJaneiro
Botafogo (Bra) 2 (Junior Santos 44, 73)
Red Bull Bragantino (Bra) 1 (Juninho Capixaba 45+2)

Mar 6 – Asuncion
Sportivo Trinidense (Par) 1 (Salcedo 36)
Colo-Colo (Chi) 1 (Zavala 60)

Mar 7 – El Alto
Always Ready (Bol) 1 (Rodrigues 13)
Nacional (Uru) 0

Third Round Qualifiers – 2nd Leg

Mar 12 – Rancagua
Palestino (Chi) 1 (Suarez 84)
Nacional (Par) 3 (D. Duarte 44, Gaona 48, Alfaro 67)
3-3 on aggregate. Palestino win 3-1 on penalties

Mar 13 – Braganca Paulista
Red Bull Bragantino (Bra) 1 (Talisson 86)
Botafogo (Bra) 1 (Junior Santos 76)
Botafogo win 3-2 on aggregate

Mar 13 – Santiago
Colo-Colo (Chi) 2 (Gil 4, Palacios 31 pen)
Sportivo Trinidense (Par) 1 (Flores 33)
Colo-Colo win 3-2 on aggregate

Mar 14 – Montevideo
Nacional (Uru) 2 (Lozano 7, Antoni 90+3)
Always Ready (Bol) 1 (Rodrigues 45+3)
2-2 on aggregate. Nacional win 5-4 on penalties

2024 COPA SUDAMERICANA

First Stage

Bolivia Zone

Mar 5 – Tarija
Real Tomayapo 0
Jorge Wilstermann 0
Real Tomayapo win 4-3 on penalties

Mar 6 – Cochabamba
Universitario de Vinto 0
Nacional Potosi 2 (Callejo 6, Cristaldo 87 pen)

Chile Zone

Mar 5 – Concepcion
Universidad Catolica 0
Coquimbo Unido 2 (Canales 52 og, Johansen 87 pen)

Mar 6 – Rancagua
Everton 0
Union La Calera 1 (Ferreyra 83)

Colombia Zone

Mar 5 – Ibague
Tolima 0
Independiente Medellin 0
Independiente Medellin win 4-2 on penalties

Mar 6 – Barranquilla
Alianza Petrolera 2 (Batalla 21, Colpa 48)
America de Cali 1 (C. Barrios 90+6)

Ecuador Zone

Mar 6 – Quito
Deportivo Cuenca 2 (Becerra 69, 90+3)
Delfin 5 (Angulo 9, 59, Gariglio 30, Oyola 41, Fratta 74 og)

Mar 7 – Ambato
Tecnico Universitario 0
Universidad Catolica 3 (Diaz 3, 47, Cifuente 11)

Paraguay Zone

Mar 6 – Asuncion
Guarani 0
Sportivo Luqueno 1 (Fernandez 87)

Mar 7 – Asuncion
Sportivo Ameliano 2 (Gonzalez 27, Samudio 31)
Olimpia 0

Peru Zone

Mar 5 – Cusco
Deportivo Garcilaso 0
ADT 0
Deportivo Garcilaso win 4-3 on penalties

Mar 7 – Trujillo
Universidad Cesar Vallejo 2 (Velez 71, Mena 78)
Sport Huancayo 0

Uruguay Zone

Mar 6 – Montevideo
Montevideo Wanderers 0
Danubio 1 (Fracchia 55)

Mar 7 – Montevideo
Racing 2 (Sosa 24, Veron Lupi 79)
Cerro Largo 0

Venezuela Zone

Mar 5 – Valencia
Carabobo 1 (J. Ortiz 64 pen)
Metropolitanos 1 (C. Ortiz 7)
Metropolitanos win 5-4 on penalties

Mar 7 – Caracas
Deportivo Rayo Zuliano 0
Deportivo La Guaira 0
Deportivo Rayo Zuliano win 4-2 on penalties

2023 SUPERCOPA ARGENTINA

Mar 13 – Cordoba
River Plate 2 (Romero 79 og, Aliendro 90+1)
Estudiantes 1 (Correa 2)

CONCACAF

2024 CONCACAF CHAMPIONS CUP

Last 16 – 1st Leg

Mar 5 – Chester
Philadelphia Union (USA) 0
Pachuca (Mex) 0

Mar 5 – Alajuela
Herediano (Crc) 2 (Montes 32, Garza 84)
Robinhood (Sur) 0

Mar 5 – Orlando
Orlando City (USA) 0
Tigres UANL (Mex) 0

Mar 6 – Zapopan
Guadalajara (Mex) 0
America (Mex) 3 (Quinones 15 pen, Valdes 70, Martin 90+4)

Mar 6 – Foxborough
New England Revolution (USA) 4 (Lima 28, Chancalay 41, 50 pen, Bajraktarevic 55)
Alajuelense (Crc) 0

Mar 6 – Houston
Houston Dynamo (USA) 0
Columbus Crew (USA) 1 (Matan 90+6)

Mar 7 – Cincinnati
FC Cincinnati (USA) 0
Monterrey (Mex) 1 (Vazquez 24)

Mar 7 – Nashville
Nashville SC (USA) 2 (Shaffelburg 4, 47)
Inter Miami (USA) 2 (Messi 52, Suarez 90+5)

Last 16 – 2nd Leg

Mar 12 – Pachuca
Pachuca (Mex) 6 (Rondon 7 pen, 45+6, 53, Suarez 57, Idrissi 63, Bautista 85)
Philadelphia Union (USA) 0
Pachuca win 6-0 on aggregate

Mar 12 – Columbus
Columbus Crew (USA) 1 (Hernandez 40)
Houston Dynamo (USA) 1 (Dorsey 90 pen)
Columbus Crew win 2-1 on aggregate

Mar 12 – San Nicolas de los Garza
Tigres UANL (Mex) 4 (Flores 13, Gignac 20 pen, Gorriaran 68, Cordova 81)
Orlando City (USA) 2 (Torres 24, Ojeda 90+1 pen)
Tigres UANL win 4-2 on aggregate

Mar 13 – Paramaribo
Robinhood (Sur) 1 (Tuur 90+4)
Herediano (Crc) 1 (Garza 56)
Herediano win 3-1 on aggregate

Mar 13 – Mexico City
America (Mex) 2 (Mozo 51 og, Zendejas 60)
Guadalajara (Mex) 3 (Cowell 12, Marin 32, Alvarado 63)
America win 5-3 on aggregate

Mar 13 – Fort Lauderdale
Inter Miami (USA) 3 (Suarez 8, Messi 23, Taylor 63)
Nashville SC (USA) 1 (Surridge 90+3)
Inter Miami win 5-3 on aggregate

Mar 14 – Alajuela
Alajuelense (Crc) 1 (Mora 4)
New England Revolution (USA) 1 (Vrioni 81)
New England Revolution win 5-1 on aggregate

Mar 14 – Guadalupe
Monterrey (Mex) 2 (Romo 41, Vazquez 68)
FC Cincinnati (USA) 1 (Acosta 47)
Monterrey win 3-1 on aggregate

Quarter-Final Draw

Herediano (Crc) v Pachuca (Mex);
America (Mex) v New England Revolution (USA);
Columbus Crew (USA) v Tigres UANL (Mex);
Inter Miami (USA) v Monterrey (Mex)
Teams drawn first will play the first leg at home

Semi-Final Draw

Herediano (Crc) or Pachuca (Mex) v America (Mex) or New England Revolution (USA);
Columbus Crew (USA) or Tigres UANL (Mex) v Inter Miami (USA) or Monterrey (Mex)
Teams drawn first will play the first leg at home

GRENADA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Paradise (C)	16	13	2	1	53	11	41
Queens Park Rangers	16	12	1	3	39	19	37
Hurricanes	16	9	2	5	37	22	29
Camerhogne	16	7	3	6	23	18	24
Mt. Rich	16	6	5	5	28	32	23
St. John's	16	6	3	7	35	33	21
Hard Rock	16	5	1	10	33	35	16
SAB Spartans	16	3	3	10	23	46	12
Sunsetters*	9	2	0	7	15	26	6
Happy Hill (R)	9	0	0	9	7	51	0

*Enter relegation play-off

ASIA

2023-24 AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

West Zone

Quarter-Finals – 1st Leg

Mar 4 – Al Ain
Al Ain (UAE) 1 (Rahimi 44)
Al Nassr (KSA) 0

Mar 5 – Riyadh
Al Hilal (KSA) 2 (Mitrovic 40, S. Al Dawsari 42)
Al Ittihad (KSA) 0

Quarter-Finals – 2nd Leg

Mar 11 – Riyadh
Al Nassr (KSA) 4 (Ghareeb 45+5, Eisa 51 og, Telles 72, Ronaldo 118 pen)
Al Ain (UAE) 3 (Rahimi 28, 45, Al Shamsi 103)
After Extra-Time. 4-4 on aggregate
Al Ain win 3-1 on penalties

Mar 12 – Jeddah
Al Ittihad (KSA) 0
Al Hilal (KSA) 2 (Al Shahrani 61, Malcom 90+5)
Al Hilal win 4-0 on aggregate

East Zone

Quarter-Finals – 1st Leg

Mar 5 – Jeonju
Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors (Kor) 1 (Song Min-kyu 4)
Ulsan HD (Kor) 1 (Lee Myung-jae 77)

Mar 6 – Jinan
Shandong Taishan (Chn) 1 (Chen Pu 90+1)
Yokohama F. Marinos (Jpn) 2 (Anderson Lopes 7, Yan Matheus 69)

Quarter-Finals – 2nd Leg

Mar 12 – Ulsan
Ulsan HD (Kor) 1 (Seol Young-woo 45+2)
Jeonbuk Hyundai Motors (Kor) 0
Ulsan HD win 2-1 on aggregate

Mar 13 – Yokohama
Yokohama F. Marinos (Jpn) 1 (Anderson Lopes 75)
Shandong Taishan (Chn) 0
Yokohama F. Marinos win 3-1 on aggregate

Semi-Finals

Apr 16-17: Al Ain (UAE) v Al Hilal (KSA); Ulsan HD (Kor) v Yokohama F. Marinos (Jpn)
Mar 23-24: Al Hilal (KSA) v Al Ain (UAE); Yokohama F. Marinos (Jpn) v Ulsan HD (Kor)

2023-24 AFC CUP

Inter-Zone Play-Offs

Semi-Finals

Mar 6-7:
Abdysh-Ata Kant (Kgz) 5-0 Taichung Futuro (Tpe); Central Coast Mariners (Aus) 4-0 Odisha (Ind)
Mar 13-14:
Taichung Futuro (Tpe) 1-3 Abdysh-Ata Kant (Kgz) (agg 1-8); Odisha (Ind) 0-0 Central Coast Mariners (Aus) (agg 0-4)

Inter-Zone final takes place April 17 and 24 with the West Zone final – Al Ahed (Lbn) v Al Nahda (Oma) – taking place April 16 and 23

YEMEN

Regular Season Group 1

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Ahli San'a*	10	8	1	1	21	2	25
Tdamn Hadramawt*	10	5	3	2	14	10	18
Al Urooba	10	3	4	3	13	10	13
Al Ittihad Ibb	10	3	2	5	8	12	11
Al Hilal Hudayda	10	2	5	3	5	14	11
Samaon	10	1	1	8	6	19	4
Al Saqr	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

*Advance to finals stage

Regular Season Group 2

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Wahda San'a*	10	6	3	1	13	8	21
Al Sha'ab Hadhramhaut*	10	5	3	2	16	10	18
Fahman	10	4	2	4	17	12	14
Salam	10	3	2	5	13	13	11
Yarmuk al Rawda	10	3	2	5	7	17	11
Al Sha'ab Ibb	10	2	2	6	13	19	8
Taliat Taiz	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

*Advance to finals stage

Semi-Finals

Jan 27-28:
Al Sha'ab Hadhramhaut 0-0 Al Ahli San'a; Tdamn Hadramawt 0-0 Al Wahda San'a
Feb 6-7:
Al Ahli San'a 1-0 Al Sha'ab Hadhramhaut (agg 1-0); Al Wahda San'a 1-1 Tdamn Hadramawt (agg 1-1p)

Third Place Play-Off

Feb 10:
Al Sha'ab Hadhramhaut p0-0 Al Wahda San'a

Final

Feb 1: Al Ahli San'a 2-0 Tdamn Hadramawt

AFRICA

2023-24 CAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Knockout Round Draw

Quarter-Finals

Simba (Tan) v Al Ahly (Egy);
TP Mazembe (Cod) v Petro Atletico (Ang);
Esperance (Tun) v ASEC Abidjan (Civ);
Young Africans (Tan) v Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA)
Teams drawn first will play the first leg at home

Semi-Finals

Esperance (Tun) or ASEC Abidjan (Civ) v Young Africans (Tan) or Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA);
TP Mazembe (Cod) or Petro Atletico (Ang) v Simba (Tan) or Al Ahly (Egy);
Teams drawn first will play the first leg at home

2023-24 CAF CONFEDERATION CUP

Group A

Feb 25:
SuperSport United (RSA) 1-1 Modern Future (Egy); Al Hilal Benghazi (Lby) 2-1 USM Alger (Alg)
Mar 3:
USM Alger (Alg) 2-1 SuperSport United (RSA); Modern Future (Egy) 5-0 Al Hilal Benghazi (Lby)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
USM Alger (Q)	6	4	1	1	8	3	13
Modern Future (Q)	6	3	2	1	9	3	11
Al Hilal Benghazi	6	2	0	4	6	13	6
SuperSport Utd	6	1	1	4	5	9	4

Group B

Feb 25:
Abu Salem (Lby) 1-2 Zamalek (Egy); SOAR (Gui) 0-0 Sagrada Esperanca (Ang)
Mar 3:
Zamalek (Egy) p-p SOAR (Gui); Sagrada Esperanca (Ang) 3-0 Abu Salem (Lby)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Zamalek (Q)	5	4	1	0	8	1	13
Abu Salem (Q)	6	3	0	3	5	6	9
Sagrada Esperanca	6	2	2	2	5	2	8
SOAR	5	0	1	4	0	9	1

Group C

Feb 25:
Academica do Lobito (Ang) 2-3 Rivers United (Nga); Dreams FC (Gha) 1-0 Club Africain (Tun)
Mar 3:
Rivers United (Nga) 2-1 Dreams FC (Gha); Club Africain (Tun) 1-1 Academica do Lobito (Ang)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Dreams FC (Q)	6	4	0	2	11	7	12
Rivers United (Q)	6	4	0	2	10	8	12
Club Africain	6	3	1	2	9	4	10
Academica do Lobito	6	0	1	5	6	17	1

Group D

Feb 25:
Stade Malien (Mli) 1-0 Diables Noirs (Cgo); Sekhukhune United (RSA) 0-0 RS Berkane (Mar)
Mar 3:
RS Berkane (Mar) 3-0 Stade Malien (Mli); Diables Noirs (Cgo) 0-0 Sekhukhune United (RSA)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
RS Berkane (Q)	6	4	2	0	10	2	14
Stade Malien (Q)	6	3	1	2	6	6	10
Sekhukhune Utd	6	1	3	2	2	4	6
Diables Noirs	6	0	2	4	3	9	2

Knockout Round Draw

Quarter-Finals

Modern Future (Egy) v Zamalek (Egy);
Abu Salem (Lby) v RS Berkane (Mar);
Rivers United (Nga) v USM Alger (Alg);
Stade Malien (Mli) v Dreams FC (Gha)
Teams drawn first will play the first leg at home

Semi-Finals

Rivers United (Nga) or USM Alger (Alg) v Abu Salem (Lby) or RS Berkane (Mar);
Modern Future (Egy) or Zamalek (Egy) v Stade Malien (Mli) or Dreams FC (Gha)
Teams drawn first will play the first leg at home

CAMEROON

Regular Season Group A

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Dynamo de Douala	18	8	6	4	21	17	30
Canon	18	8	6	4	24	14	30
Gazelle	18	6	8	4	20	18	26
Colombe	18	6	8	4	20	17	26
Aigle Royal	18	7	4	7	21	19	25
Union Douala	18	6	6	6	18	21	24
PWD	18	6	6	6	17	18	24
Bamboutos	18	7	2	9	28	26	23
Fortuna Mfou	18	3	8	7	11	23	17
Les Astres	18	5	2	11	22	29	17

Regular Season Group B

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Stade Renard	16	9	4	3	18	10	31
Cotonsport	16	8	5	3	23	9	29
Young Sport Academy	16	7	3	6	17	14	24
Fauve Azur Elite	16	6	5	5	14	17	23
Victoria United*	16	7	4	5	24	20	22
UMS de Loum	16	4	7	5	10	13	19
Fovu Club	16	4	5	7	15	19	17
Avion Academy	16	2	8	6	11	18	14
APEJES Academy	16	1	7	8	9	21	10

*Deducted 3 points

The top four in each group advance to the championship round with the bottom five in each group entering the relegation round

OCEANIA

2024 OFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

National Play-Offs

Fiji

Feb 8 – Nausori
Rewa 0
Lautoka 0

Feb 11 – Lautoka
Lautoka 2 (Waqa 18, Lairoti 90+9 pen)
Rewa 3 (Kautoga 71, Hughes 82, 100 pen)
After Extra-Time. Rewa win 3-2 on aggregate

New Caledonia

Feb 17 – Noumea
ASC Gaica 1 (Wahiobe 90+10)
AS Magenta 2 (Jewine 35, Watu 65)

Feb 24 – Noumea
AS Magenta 0
ASC Gaica 0
AS Magenta win 2-1 on aggregate

New Zealand

Mar 9 – Auckland
Auckland City 1 (Ukich 72)
Wellington Olympic 0

Mar 16 – Wellington
Wellington Olympic 3 (Watson 20, 28, Randall 23)
Auckland City 3 (Ilich 27, Murati 48, Howieson 81)
Auckland City win 4-3 on aggregate

Papua New Guinea

Feb 10 – Port Moresby
Port Moresby Strikers 0
Hekari United 2 (Kepo 60, Yasasa 71)

Feb 17 – Port Moresby
Hekari United 3 (Kila 25, Rani 75, Joe 90+4 pen)
Port Moresby Strikers 0
Hekari United win 5-0 on aggregate

Solomon Islands

Feb 17 – Honiara
Central Coast 0
Solomon Warriors 1 (Feni 5 pen)

Feb 22 – Honiara
Solomon Warriors 1 (Feni 67)
Central Coast 1 (Leslie 8)
Solomon Warriors win 2-1 on aggregate

Tahiti

Mar 12 – Pirae
Pirae 1 (Tau 77)
Tefana 1 (Leon 88)

Mar 16 – Pirae
Tefana 1 (Kaspard 104)
Pirae 1 (Labaste 120+1)
After Extra-Time. 2-2 on aggregate
Pirae win 5-4 on penalties

Vanuatu

Feb 24 – Luganville
Classic 1 (Ollie 49)
Ifira Black Bird 2 (Kalotang 28, Wohale 45+2)

Feb 28 – Port Vila
Ifira Black Bird 1 (Spokeyjack 29)
Classic 1 (Toata 42)
Ifira Black Bird win 3-2 on aggregate

Group Stage Draw

Group A

Solomon Warriors (Sol), Hekari United (Png), Rewa (Fij), Auckland City (Nzl)

Group B

Pirae (Tah), Vaivase-Tai (Sam), Ifira Black Bird (Van), AS Magenta (Ncl)

Group stage kicks off on May 15

May 2024 *Vol. 64 No.9*

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PICTURES
Pictures copyright: Getty Images

SPECIAL THANKS THIS ISSUE TO:
Keir Radnedge, Steve Menary, James Nalton, Danny Lewis & Lewis Watson

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Kelsey Media, The Granary, Downs Court, Yalding Hill, Yalding, Maidstone, Kent, ME18 6AL

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DISTRIBUTION
Great Britain: Seymour Distribution Ltd
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Edmilson

Real Madrid 0 Barcelona 3

2005-06 La Liga, Santiago Bernabeu

Real Madrid's fans standing to applaud the genius of Ronaldinho remains one of the most iconic images in Clasico history. Watching on was his Barcelona team-mate and fellow Brazilian, Edmilson...

Brazilian battle... Edmilson wins a header against his compatriot Ronaldo inside the Bernabeu

"This was a great *Clasico*. Real Madrid had a front line that day of Ronaldo, Robinho and Raul, with Zidane in behind. We marked zonally, and the players closest to my zone were Raul and Zidane. It is never easy to mark players at this level, but our squad was full of quality and the level of our training was always very high.

We had three very important players – Ronaldinho, Eto'o and Messi. We prepared ourselves as every high-level player must prepare for any difficulty that may arise in a game like this. But I also knew the style of play of my fellow Brazilians: Ronaldo, who is more explosive and talented, and Robinho, who has more skill. That experience helps in one-v-one duels.

The *Clasico* is always an atypical game. The level of concentration has to be a little above average. At that time, we were going through a great period, with players who were at the peak of their careers, perhaps more at the top of their game than some of the Real Madrid players. Real had great talent, but as a group Barca was better.

Eto'o scored after 15 minutes. He was in great form and was a natural goalscorer who scored goals in every possible way.

It was 1-0 at half-time and we were dominant. Playing against Real was never easy, but Barca had a model that didn't change, regardless of the opponent, from smaller teams to big teams like Real.

Ronaldinho was making an impact not only at Barca but worldwide. He scored in the second half, a magnificent solo goal. We knew he was way above average. Like in Messi's best years at Barca, he defined games, important matches like *Clasicos*, semi-finals and finals. He was voted the best player in the world twice in a row. Those of us who worked with him day-to-day knew that he could unlock any type of game at any time. That first goal really was magical. I remember celebrating a lot. I had a great friendship with Ronaldinho and I was happy to witness that moment.

Real didn't create many opportunities – we dominated the game. Sometimes, when a team is superior, it's not because the opponent is bad – Real Madrid had a constellation of stars and players who could make a difference at any moment, and Zidane assisted Ronaldo but the goal was ruled out for offside. We always had to be alert against these big players, but the level of concentration was high.

Ronaldinho's second goal was as good as his first. To be honest, I was used to it: we saw Ronaldinho perform magic every day, whether in training or in games.

The main memory I have of that game was the entire Bernabeu applauding him. We were good friends and he called me "Skinny". He called me before the game and said: "Skinny, steal the ball and give it to me and I'll solve it." He was motivated.

This game was all about Ronaldinho – with his two goals and the opposing fans applauding him – but a great talent also emerged: Messi. We already saw that he was different, both in training and in games, so I wasn't surprised by his performance in *El Clasico*; we saw the potential he had. I was just surprised by his future, because I didn't imagine he would become one of the best players in history.

Winning a *Clasico* is almost like winning a championship. The celebrations in the locker room were sensational and I remember it as if it were yesterday.

> "I was used to it: we saw Ronaldinho perform magic every day, whether in training or in games"

Star of the show... Ronaldinho springs past Sergio Ramos on his way to the Real Madrid goal

I had four very happy years at Barca, but the 2005-06 season was very special for me as I played most of the games in the league and the Champions League. I believe that I left something special at the club and my name is written in the history of the great Barcelona."

Interview by Ryan Baldi

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